COMMUNITY COLLEGES: EXPLORING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP AS A ROUTE TO HIGHER RETENTION AND COMPLETION RATES

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Abstract

No one is born with leadership skills. These skills are acquired or learned through a plethora of avenues. Leadership skills must be developed in order to ensure the continuation of a democratic process and society, but may also be needed to ensure the completion of goals. College campuses, including Community Colleges, can be a potential learning environment for tomorrow leaders, as well as the beginning foundation of goals set by those seeking career success. Current literature focuses on student leadership on college campuses; however there is less focus on Community Colleges, underrepresented students and the impact that leadership may have upon goal completion.

Through the use of a narrative study, where students stories can be told in their own voices the impact of attending a Community College and participating in leadership roles by underrepresented students shall be explored. Through engagement in the Community College and opportunities to grow in leadership the students shall provide insight as to their expectations and accomplishments as they seek to obtain degrees and skills at the local Community College. Through their stories as we as insight into studies and history that have been collected on student leadership and the underrepresented students it is the hope that programming can be created and implemented to encourage student participation in leadership at the Community College, especially by the population that attends Community College in the highest numbers, the underrepresented students.
Acknowledgments

There would be no paper to read if it were not for all the students who allowed me to be a part of their lives and who allowed me to listen to their stories, therefore I cannot thank you all enough for all that you have given to me and for allowing me to share my love of learning.

My husband and boys were my source of encouragement and strength throughout this process and were the driving force that would not allow me to give up on my students or myself so to them I send all my love and thanks.

To my Advisor at Northeastern University, thank you for allowing me the privilege of working with you and for supporting my ideas, thoughts and research. Dr. Thompson, you are a gift to the education world.

To my mentors who without their guidance I would not have had the courage to continue in my studies and education; there is no such word as “can’t”, there are not enough words to use to thank you all for removing all negative thoughts from my head.

Finally, I cannot thank the college and my colleagues enough for their encouragement throughout this entire process. I truly understand what it means to be a part of a community.
CHAPTER 1

Statement of the Problem

As college funders and the general public call for completion as an indicator of success of the college, college administrators focus their attention on ways to increase retention and completion rates of for all Community College students. Many studies have indicated that for student retention and completion rates to improve students must come and remain engaged in the college from semester to semester. If students who are involved and engaged in their education are more likely to retain and complete college, administrators and other interested parties need to focus on how to engage students earlier in hopes of obtaining higher retention and completion rate.

Community Colleges were built to aid communities where they were developed. This aid included providing an educated workforce. Currently employers are in need of quality, educated workers. There is a call for employees who are critical thinkers who have good communication skills as well as the ability to work as a member of a team. If students were able to learn these skills, perhaps through campus involvement and leadership opportunities, then those students who complete their education including those soft skills will become more effective, involved and successful employees and community members. Therefore there appears to be a need to study how Community College student involvement/engagement, focusing on those students in leadership roles can impact retention and completion rates at the Community College.

Community Colleges are seen as a stepping-stone for many students seeking to gain education beyond the secondary level or in some cases the only educational option beyond high school for students who are in need of additional academic and social supports. So why do
students attend the Community College? Is it to engage with their peers, improve their skills or to achieve a certificate or associates degree? According to Bers and Smith (1991) academia needs to know the intentions of the students in order to meet their needs and assist them in achieving their goals. During these times however, academia is focused on the completion rate of all students in higher education. This goal however may be conflicting with the students’ goals and abilities due to outside pressures. So is this goal of completion for all unattainable?

Past research has indicated that college students who engage in activities beyond the classroom tend to retain, and complete their goals more than students who are not actively engaged in the college (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1993). Of those students who do retain, and move on to four-year institutions there is some research that indicates that those who do retain attribute their retention to participation in leadership opportunities and development (Terenzini, P.T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T. & Nora, A., 1996). Therefore it seems natural to make an assumption whereby engaging students, and specifically engaging them in leadership opportunities there would be a higher number reaching their goals and transferring on to other institutions.

The purpose of this current research is to see if opportunities to engage and participate in student leadership does lead to higher educational success, including increased retention and completion rates among Community College students (many of whom are members of underrepresented populations including those based on race, ethnicity and/or socioeconomic status). The study asked what experiences self-identified underrepresented students have had in leadership and their thoughts on whether or not those experiences have assisted them in achieving their goals at the Community College.
Research Problem

Community Colleges today are looking to find solutions to student retention and completion. Questions need to be answered that lead to solutions for keeping students engaged in their learning and enable students to complete their collegiate goals. The student population is diverse in many ways and it is more difficult to engage these students due to the needs of this population. The issue then becomes how to engage this diverse student body in activities, such as leadership, so they feel a part of their educational journey by being engaged and invest both academically and socially. The student that feels totally invested in the education will be the student who has a higher rate of retention and completion.

According to Choy (2001) nearly 50% of all college students are first generation students, and Ortiz (2000) cited that 46% of all enrolled Community College students are members of an ethnic minority, and this is just a sampling of the groups of underrepresented populations that attend Community College. Many first generation students attend Community College and many do not persist in college (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Reasons varied for the lack of persistence, including family obligations, and work obligations which inevitably lead to a lack of involvement or engagement in the college and less engagement or personal investment in the college appears to attribute to the lack of retention among this group of students (Ortiz, 2000, and Mehta, Newbold, and O’Rourke, 2011).

Since research indicates that a student needs to be involved to persist in school (Terenzini, P.T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T. & Nora, A., 1996), then a deeper understanding of the relationship between student leadership and retention may indicate who becomes involved in campus activities at the Community College level and why they become involved. This information could potentially assist college administrators in developing
programming to engage and develop leadership amongst the student body. Not only will an understanding of student leadership experiences benefit institutions, but could also benefit the students themselves. Miles (2010) puts it succinctly, “As student leaders, they serve their fellow students by representing their interests to administrators and by challenging the decisions of college leaders” (p. 78). If student leadership can be further developed at the Community College then these are traits that will benefit individuals whether it be at other educational institutions or in the workplace.

**Justification for research**

Persistence and retention describe the current needs of the administration in higher education. Students at the Community College level do not complete or retain at significant rates and the administration of the institutions are receiving pressure to answer why these students do not persist to completion. Astin (1984, 1993) discussed that those students retaining appear to come from those students who are more actively engaged in their learning and their learning community. Therefore, it would be important for college administrators to discover if engagement does indeed impact retention and if it could assist in raising completion rates.

Dougherty and Bakia (1999) indicated that there needs to be more data collected from the Community Colleges to show their programming worth and accountability. As the rise in talk about performance based funding continues these institutions need to seek out data and relate their findings to the student successes that do occur. If indeed the data show deficiencies then that data can be utilized to develop programming to increase retention and completion rates. At the time of Dougherty and Bakia’s study (1999) New York had no statewide performance reporting system, and still does not, however the conversation has increased recently displaying
the need for research and data pertaining to retention and completion has become a priority on many college campuses.

Community College students do seek opportunities for leaderships and involvement however as Miles (2010) stated: “The concept that Community College students want to build a culture of involvement, however, has not been covered in the literature” (Miles, 2010, p. 85). This is an area that needs to be further explored as the information gathered will assist in creating a culture and environment whereby students may retain, complete and persist in their professional fields of interest more often upon completion of higher education goals.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Studies specifically looking at the student population at the Community College are limited. Sorey (2006) writes, "While substantial literature guides the understanding of student persistence at four-year colleges and universities, literature that contributes to the understanding of student persistence in Community Colleges is scarce" (pp. 16-17). Bailey and Weininger (2002) enforce the lack of research based on Community College stating that although over half of the first-time college attendees choose Community Colleges most research is focused upon four-year institutions.

Klein (2013) conducted a study looking at building connections with first-year students at the Community College and found that research specifically on Community College students was sparse. Research based on students attending four-year institution far outweighs what has been done with the Community College population in terms of involvement and retention. Furthermore, Klein (2013) indicated that the call for Community Colleges to become more accountable for student success as a need for more studies specifically involving Community College student populations.
Specific studies have also been done whereby retention rates have been linked to the engagement of the student both academically and socially at the institution of higher education. Jordan (2013) specifically looked at how academic performance, and increased retention rates are associated with higher engagement rates at the Community College level. Additionally, this study revealed the numerous variety in the populations at the Community College and the need to obtain better data on the services, including engagement, of those diverse students in order to develop programming that could assist in retention rates at the Community College.

Lastly there are recent studies about the effects of leadership among underrepresented students, however limited to those attending four-year institutions (Herron, 2012). Specific programs have been developed that equate leadership development to college retention and success for underrepresented students in the Northwest (Herron, 2012). The study recognized that for numerous decades the question has gone unanswered as to why underrepresented students leave academia, but there have been no answers. The Act Six program was reviewed in this study, which pointed out that with support and development, specifically through leadership opportunities, underrepresented students did retain and persist at a higher rate. This is a model that has shown success, however has not reached the level of acknowledgement to build upon its success. Therefore, it is with this study that study the underrepresented Community College population can be reviewed to see if there is merit in providing leadership opportunities to those students and their persistence at the Community College.

Relating the Discussion to the Audience

Community College

Traditionally Community Colleges have been funded through state and local funds. Therefore in good economic times the colleges can provide more and do more, but during low
economic times the colleges funding can decrease and thus decrease ability to provide services and education for the community. Goldrick-Rab (2010) indicated that Community Colleges nationally received 60% of their funding from state and local entities. However, Community Colleges are now being asked to relook at how they are funded. At this time there is increased pressure in seeking to go towards a formula of funding based on retention, completion and a performance based funding stream based on student success. Administrators are looking for ways to assist students, faculty and staff in developing ways to increase performance through retention and completion in order to hold onto current funding as well as utilize that data to seek other ways to increase funding for the college. Therefore, this research can assist College Administrators in providing the data needed as they seek funding and information of effects of funding based on performance (retention/completion).

**Student Affairs**

Bragg (2001) concluded that the population of students attending Community Colleges consisted of a diverse group including older students, more women, members of diverse ethnic or racial groups, employed either full or part time and many were more likely to be first generation college attending students. This is key for Student Affairs staff to be aware of as they develop and devise campus initiatives and programs to ensure student success. This study shall look at those self-identified underrepresented students and their thoughts on how the institution as well as the opportunities provided to them allowed for their success or in some cases perhaps their motivation to either persist or transfer.

**Students**

“Community Colleges have traditionally benefited low-income students, who use them as a stepping stone to better jobs and higher education” (Santibanez, L., Gonzalez, G., Morrison, P.)
& Carroll, S. J., 2007, p.52). Students therefore who attend Community Colleges are attending for a variety of reasons. Although the reasons may vary the student has a goal in mind and a path he or she has chosen to follow. The opportunities both academically and socially that the Community College can provide will become the resources that the student who perseveres will seek out to reach his or her goal. Students are seeking information on how to become successful as they spend time and monies for self-improvement through education via a Community College education. Dempster and Lizzio (2007) stated that new research needs to be conducted that incorporates what and how students think about education and leadership including a student’s definition of leadership. Therefore students’ involvement in this study will provide information about services; organizations and other ideas student have about how to achieve their educational and professional goals.

**Significance of Research Problem**

Community Colleges are diverse institutions that serve a wide variety of needs. These include the students who attend to upgrade their skills for a particular job, students who are pursuing an associate degree to transfer to a 4-year institution, and students who attend to pursue a hobby (such as learning a language). The educational outcomes of Community College students reflect this diversity. (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014, retrieved January 2014)

Research, based on the population served by the Community Colleges, is needed to increase and improve on the educational opportunities for the numerous individuals that seek out those institutions to develop skills, gain employable skills or build a foundation to transfer to a four-year college or university. This research will look to tie in the diverse population at the Community College with retention, goal completion and leadership development.

Performance based funding has become a nationwide phenomenon over the last decade. Dougherty & Bakia (2005) indicated that the pressure to reach performance rates may cause colleges to put more stress on achieving higher rates of retention, graduation, and job placement;
resulting in less emphasis on improving access to higher education and providing a general education. Performance indicators include: persistence and retention, rate of transfer, graduation or completion rates, degree of success in students entering the workforce, student performance on licensing exams and overall student satisfaction with the education received (Dougherty & Bakia, 2005). By reviewing what students obtain or feel they have obtained through their opportunities to participate in Community College some of these indicators may have already proved to have been met while others may be alerted as areas in need of improvement. As nationally more and more colleges begin to use performance based funding and indicators, this research could prove to be valuable in the introduction of data collection and indicators that could also be included in the collection of data by institutions.

**Positionality Statement**

Students who do not generally engage or become involved at their college within the first three to six weeks of attending tend to transfer or withdraw completely from higher education (Milem and Berger, 1997). Being a first generation college attending youth my goal was to go to college and obtain a degree against the odds that had been stacked against me. With no guidance and no connection to the institution I completed a Bachelor’s degree in four years. However, during those four years I attended three different higher educational institutions. I never engaged, made friends nor became involved at an institution until my senior year. It was at this time I was asked by a professor to sit on an accreditation evaluation team as the student representative. This was my first taste of student leadership. It was the first and only time I engaged and felt a part of the university. It was the semester I learned the most, about people, things and education.

Forward that youth from the 1980’s to the Administrator at a local Community College whose job it is to get students engaged and involved in student leadership. On a daily basis I
work with numerous students in Student Congress, various clubs and organizations and in
leadership development programs where they can act as student ambassadors and orientation
leaders. I share the story of how important it was once I got involved and how I got involved too
late to take advantage of all that college life had to offer. I know the important role students play
within higher education, but I am not sure they understand. Therefore, it is my goal with this
research study to provide data, in the form of student narratives that demonstrate the role of
leadership and engagement in success of finishing college.

As Ostrom-Blonigen, Bornsen, Larson-Casselton and Erickson (2010) put it succinctly:
“Student leadership training is important. An individual demonstrates his or her ability to think
and interact like a leader by choosing an appropriate strategy for communicating with members”
(p. 247). I know how important it is for students to get involved and the research supports my
thoughts on how student leadership can help an individual develop multiple skills. The student
becomes more knowledgeable and more marketable having participated in student government. I
have witnessed this in my personal experience and in my career.

Currently, I am employed at a Community College as the Director of Student
Engagement and Outreach. On two campuses, I oversee Student Activities and Government.
This provides me great insight to the students’ experiences both academically and personally. It
is through the students I have developed a passion for investing and researching how these
experiences outside of the classroom can assist them in retaining and completing their academic
goals.

Several Community Colleges across the country have developed student life centers that
help students to develop leadership skills outside the academic classrooms of learning (Downey,
Frost, Holland, Schultz and Strom, 2010, p. 5). The goal of these programs are to keep students
engaged and involved in other areas where they can learn and grow, however, are still connected to the college campus. This is an ideal program and one that I would truly like to see developed on my own campus. The research is again showing correlation to my thoughts on the importance of student leadership development, which in turn appears to assist the student in becoming academically accomplished.

Even though I see the potential of student leadership in aiding students to finish school, I also have some concerns. I have witnessed students who take on leadership and place those responsibilities above their academic requirements. Some students become overly involved and forget that the true reason for attending college is to obtain a degree not just to become part of the student body. Other instances have shown, in my experience, where the governing body of the institutions places too much responsibility upon the student leaders and overwhelm the students with the running of the institution. In the end there needs to be a balance between involvement, engagement, leadership and academics in order for the student to become a prepared, engaging and educated member of society. The study I conduct will provide me with data so I can address potential concerns I have about underrepresented populations and student involvement in leadership opportunities. My ultimate goal will be to guide my practices based on the findings of this study and seek to assist students in reaching personal, professional and academic goals while attending the Community College.

**Research Questions/Hypothesis**

- Why do self-identified, underrepresented students engage and actively participate in student leadership opportunities at the Community College?
• How do self-identified, underrepresented students who engage and actively participate in student leadership opportunities describe their current experiences in leadership and academics?

• How do self-identified, underrepresented students who engage and actively participate in student leadership opportunities describe the connection between their Community College experience (academics and student leadership) with their future plans?

Theoretical Framework

Leadership development theory (Komives, S.R., Mainella, F.C., Longerbeam, S.D., Osteen, L. and Owen, J.E., 2006, p. 402) seeks to understand how leaders are developed and if that development takes place due to learned behaviors or from ideologies one has due to other factors such as culture, family or place in society. Komives et al. (2006) indicate that "leadership development involves engaging with learning opportunities in one’s environment over time to build one’s capacity or efficacy to engage in leadership” theory (Komives, S.R., Mainella, F.C., Longerbeam, S.D., Osteen, L. and Owen, J.E., 2006, p. 402). More specifically, leadership development theory indicates that students will follow a path of development going through the following phases: awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identification, leadership differentiation, generativity and finally integration/synthesis into leadership.

Awareness looks at the student who is originally recognized as a leader or a potential leader. This is the first process that occurs and it occurs as either the student makes him or her available to be seen as having leadership skills or the potential to develop leadership skills or it comes by the selection of others to promote what is seen in that individual student that can develop into a leader.
Once a student has been made aware of the potential there begins a process of *exploration or engagement* in leadership opportunities through interests of the individual student. A student can explore interests in government and processes or through an interest based on their academics. An interest area may develop through the student becoming involved in a club that is based on their academics and then exploring the opportunity to become a leader within that student organization.

Through involvement the student becomes *identified as a leader*. Jobs and duties assigned are completed and this work ethic may then turn into leader development. The leader develops through a process of emergence and immersion in the organization showing the need for the group to unite and for leadership to orchestrate the group’s mission.

The next phase that is recognized by the Leadership Identity Development Model recognizes that leaders come from all over and are diverse. *Leadership differentiation* helps to engage the leader with the activity that is most appropriate for his skills in leadership to be utilized. This matches the individual strengths with the area that can gain the most from that type of guidance and leadership.

As the leader utilizes his strengths to bring a group together the leader then can enter generativity. *Generativity* allows for the leader to recognize the needs of the individuals involved and to go beyond one’s personal agenda to meet the goals of the individuals who have chosen to unite. The leader has developed the skill to look beyond one’s self and to care for the need and wants of others.

Finally the leader develops to the final stage of *integration and synthesis*. This area takes the leader through a lifelong process of development and improvement as a leader. This stage
allows for continued growth as the individual has been noted as a strong, defined leader among his peers.

The ability to grow and develop through these phases of leadership development will provide an opportunity for students to become engaged in their college setting as well as their academics. Student Engagement theorists have long stated that this type of engagement promotes retention as the student feels a part of the community within the institution.

**Illustration of Leadership Development Theory**

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CHAPTER 2

Introduction

Hierarchy exists in all areas of life, family, education and workforce. Children learn from birth where they are in the hierarchy through birth order and status such as male or female. This continues throughout life. From the time one enters educational institutions there is a hierarchy whereby there are students who answer to teachers and teachers who answer to administrators. This does not change once you leave that setting and eventually enter the workforce. Therefore, how and where do people learn where they belong in the hierarchy and is it possible to learn skills and manners to move up within the hierarchy. Higher education is a means to lead one to a better economic standing and perhaps also the place to learn to grow and move within that hierarchy. The key is to be successful at learning, including learning how to move up the ladder of hierarchy.

Student Leadership and College Success

Students in higher education did not particularly play any role in the governance or leadership of the educational institutions they attended until the later part of the 1960’s (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010). The 1960s are generally viewed as a period of social change because of the many social movements that occurred including the Civil Rights movement and the Women’s Movement. The Vietnam War also sparked emotion across the United States as many people protested both sides. College students were involved in all of these movements. They rebelled against many things, including how higher educational institutions were governed and operated, leaders among students became apparent and groups began to form behind that leadership. This then began student governance and more specifically, participation in leadership.
on college campuses (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010). Today there are a variety of leadership programs, including, but not limited to, student government and clubs/organizations. These leadership opportunities help to provide skills outside the classroom that can help students succeed during and after their college experience.

Globalization and advances in technology necessitates that students are career and/or college ready (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2011). However if, and when, they choose a college track, there is a need to look at the all-learning opportunities that can be provided (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2011). These opportunities for learning and growth occur in and out of the classroom. Leadership is a skill set that if developed by the college student could be utilized in obtaining employment after college (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). Furthermore, leadership development among young people can help to ensure the continuation of a democratic process in this country (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010).

The analysis that follows will review how student leadership is developed and perceived, by students, faculty and administrators on college campuses. Differing student populations that participate in leadership, if indeed underrepresented students do participate in leadership in college will also be reviewed. Finally, literature will be reviewed to see if there is a relationship between student’s success, retention, or goal completion on a student’s choice to participate in leadership opportunities at the college level.

This literature review will look at the definitions and development of Community Colleges, student leadership, development of leaders, engagement of potential leaders and ideas for encouraging those groups, particularly underrepresented students. The underrepresented students do not take advantage of leadership opportunities, hence, if they were encouraged to participate in these opportunities we can also review their retention and goal completion. Results
from previous studies will indicate what has and has not worked on campuses and indicate what will be needed in future studies and practice to provide new and innovative opportunities for all students to participate in activities. These leadership-building opportunities will help build leadership skills, assist in retaining students from semester to semester as well as provide students possibilities to participate more actively in student governance on campus.

The structure of this review will first look at defining Community Colleges, followed by defining student governance and leadership. These definitions vary and, therefore, the research may be skewed without clear direction based on the definitions utilized. Next, a historical look at where student governance and leadership developed and where it is today will show the direction and growth of leadership programs on college campuses. This will lead to focus on how faculty and administrators view student governance and leadership. Additionally, it will be important to look at the impact gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation has on students’ involvement in governance and leadership opportunities. These and other groups will be defined as those students who are among the underrepresented populations at the college. Finally, there will be a look to see if any of the current literature notes any relationship between retention/completion and students participation in leadership and governance. A conclusion and summary with ideas for future research will finalize the entire review.

**An Overview of Community Colleges**

Community Colleges developed as an educational extension, after students completed the K-12 system, to obtain further training in order to build a better workforce (Wells, 2008). These community based educational centers were methodically placed in cities, or near cities, where the population and economic growth would prosper from them. According to the Association of
Community Colleges (2000) two-year public institutions such as Community Colleges represent approximately one fourth of all higher educational institutions in the United States.

Born on the premise of open enrollment and access for all, the Community College population is diverse and varied. As Baird (1990) put it, “Community Colleges students are older, attend part-time more often, do not reside on campus, have lower aspirations, have lower high school grades, have more modest financial resources, are employed for more hours, have more family responsibilities, have relatively little interaction with other students outside the classroom, and are not strongly involved in campus activities then compared to students at four-year institutions” (p. 1). In other words, for most Community College students, their primary focus is not related to their schoolwork and related campus activities. These institutions traditionally attract higher proportion of low-income, first generation students from various ethnic and racial backgrounds (Association of Community Colleges, 2000). Students from underrepresented populations are more likely to attend Community Colleges than traditional four-year setting (Association of Community Colleges, 2000).

Community College graduation rates are determined by how many students complete the requirements for an associate’s degree, even though this is not every student’s goal. For students who do enroll for the purpose of completing an associate’s degree, only 38.7% of all students enrolled at the Community College would graduate and receive a degree (Tinto, 1993) His study indicated that because of the population at the Community College and their multiple outside interests (family, jobs, etc.) were barriers to their success as a college student. The balancing act that a Community College student, who lives off campus, works part-time and may have a family often outweigh the forces that will keep that student engaged, involved and academically successful at college, unlike the traditional four-year university student (Zhai and Monzon, 2001).
Community Colleges have traditionally enrolled large numbers of minorities and non-traditional students. Lannan (2000), stated that in 2000 30% of Community College enrollments were minority students and that 58% were women. For many of these students the reasons to attend Community College include poverty, lack of academic preparation and vocational interest versus liberal arts. (Lannan, 2000). Many of these first generation college students are seeking an education as a stepping-stone to better jobs and higher income than their parents (Santibanez, Gonzalez, Morrison and Carrol, 2007). Goldrick-Rab (2010) summed it up by stating that the majority of students attending Community Colleges faced the following challenges: social inequality, academic challenges, economic challenges, social and informational hurdles and lack of commitment.

The American Association of Community Colleges reported that there were over 1,100 Community Colleges in the United States and that those colleges enrolled over 11 million students, which represents over 40% of all college students enrolled in the United States (AACC, 2010). The 2010 Center for Community College Student Engagement study showed that those students who are engaged are less likely to drop out of college.

Reeve (2012) defines engagement as “the extent to which a student’s active involvement in a learning activity” (p. 150). This engagement is important as it makes learning possible, predicts how well a student will do in school and assists teachers and others in seeing the outcome of their efforts to motivate students (Reeve, 2012). What faculty and staff at colleges are seeking in the end are achievement, learning and skill development and through engagement with the student and their learning these can be accomplished.

Additionally, the engagement can be further enhanced by seeking involvement of the student in a variety of ways within the college. Students who get involved in their learning and
community have a vested interest in that institution and this interest can assist in retaining the student until he meets his goals (Roberts and McNeese, 2008). Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded in their research that the impact that college has on one is largely associated with that person’s effort and level of involvement in academic as well as non-academic activities. By participating in student government and leadership on campus students can experience a high level of involvement that could impact their academic and professional aspirations.

**Defining Student Governance and Leadership**

Student governance is generally one of the institutional governing bodies that receives information or has information or responsibility delegated to them from the Board of Trustees of the institution. Creamer (1975) states that governance “suggests a structure which governs or leads. A more careful definition of the word “governance” includes exercise of authority, direction, control” (p.111). Creamer (1975) goes on further to say that student governance, however, is not always seen in this type of capacity but instead as “where the action is” (Creamer, 1975, p. 111). In a well-developed management system, all concerned parties should be involved in the decision-making and this is how student governance should be seen and represented. This representation by students, however, is usually limited and not wanted by all within the college system.

Students can also at times be seen as consumers or clients as they are purchasing a service. As seen through the use of this definition, Luescher-Mamashela (2010) describes students as clients and, therefore, the participation in student governance was seen by most as “the representation of service-users on user committees” (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010, p. 262). If,
indeed, students are seen as stakeholders, then a sense of ownership may take place and students then take on student governance as a right and develop it as a part of a governed democracy.

Students who participate in student government are leaders. According to Ostrom-Blonigen, Bornsen, Larson-Casselton, and Erickson (2010), someone who exhibits leadership is, “an individual who demonstrates his or her ability to think and interact like a leader by choosing an appropriate strategy for communicating with members” (p. 247). Therefore, according to this definition, communication skills are the strongest linkage to the development and usage of good leadership skills. As leaders in student government, student representatives communicate between higher education administration and the larger student population.

Students’ definitions of governance and leadership play a major role in how these concepts are perceived and influenced by the college community. Perception of what governance and leadership are can either influence or deter a student from pursuing or participating in these roles. Attempts to define these terms vary from institution to institution and from researcher to researcher. Defining these terms is one of the areas that researchers agree is needed but almost impossible to obtain. As Shertzer and Schuh (2004) put it, “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (p. 112). The same can be said of student government leadership.

**History and Development of Student Governance and Leadership**

College students had a small role in the governing of the higher education institutions, but that role truly did not develop or become an influential part of higher education governance until the 1960s. It was during this period, the ending period of *in loco parentis* that lead to student movements seeking rights as not only students but as consumers. “This collaboration
among students dismantled *in loco parentis*, and formalized channels for students to participate in institutional decision-making” (Miles, Miller, and Nadler, 2008, p. 1061).

Student involvement in governance began to emerge in the 1970s, when faculty was at the same time seeking academic freedom. Student involvement at that time was more an appointed position rather than a democratic process. It became clear at this time that student involvement meant the seeking of approval by Boards and their “voluntarily relinquishing control and granting constituencies, such as students, access and opportunities for involvement” (Love and Miller, 2000, p. 532). Activism allowed students to gain more power and the power granted through the oversight of non-curricular things such as student activities, clubs or organizations on campuses. Students were given access to oversee social activities, but it would take another 30 years of student development to see an attitudinal shift at the institutions to include students in the governing of the actual institution (Love and Miller, 2000).

In the late 1990s development of leadership programs on campuses began to rise. It was believed that the development of leadership on campus would allow for greater career potential by the student. “Academia then must work to be positioned to assist students in meeting continuously evolving needs of the workplace” (Ostrom-Blonigen, Bornsen, Larson-Casselton, and Erickson, 2010, p. 250). Therefore, the growth in need for students to participate and learn about leadership increased over the years. The development of leadership programs and opportunities on campuses grew out of the need for students to receive this as part of their overall learning.

“Learning is part of life, so is leadership. At some point the two will intersect” (Gehert, 2010, p.6), and it is when one is integrated into higher education the two, learning and leadership, can come together. Research after 2000 indicated there was interest to look further at leadership
programs on college campuses, hence many universities first started the development of leadership programs, however, many feel it still remains in the infancy stage of development (Gehert, 2010). Through the review of the history of student leadership development on college campuses, it is apparent that the need and want for student involvement in governance and leadership development is present. However, there have been roadblocks along the developmental path (Gehert, 2010). Unfortunately, some of the roadblocks have been employees in higher education including administrators, faculty and staff.

A **pposition, Faculty and Staff Viewpoints on Student Governance and Leadership**

Throughout time, there have been questions that the college personnel have had concerning student governance and leadership. Are students qualified to hold a seat representing any governing authority? What skills do they possess and who will cultivate the necessary skills? Miles, Miller, and Nadler (2008) acknowledged that there is concern by faculty/staff and administrators on college campuses pertaining to the qualifications of student leaders, the emotional maturity of potential student leaders and college student ability to make well thought out decisions for a larger body. These unanswered questions may be the root of uncertainty on campuses concerning the relationship between students, faculty, administrators and the Board of Trustees in relationship to student leadership and governance.

As noted by Hoffman, Rosenfield, Gilbert, and Oandasan, (2008) support of the faculty and administrators is essential to the success of student governance as well as student leadership development. Ultimately, the administration of the institution can make or break the student governing body and any potential leadership development programming. The key to how these facets work together greatly impacts whether or not student governance works, whether or not
student leadership is developed or if it is pacified throughout the duration of the student’s college career.

Miles (2009) discussed the importance of having administrators acknowledge the challenges that student governments face and to be willing to guide the students through those pitfalls. One method used on Grande and Srinivas (2001) study that helped to encourage work between potential student leaders and administrators involved “institutionally-supported, student-led projects” (Grande, and Srinivas, 2001, p. 204). These student-driven projects would be supported by faculty and perhaps graduate student mentors who could grow the leadership of the younger, less experienced students. Administrators could also sign on as mentors. By utilizing this type of program and uniting administrators, staff and students, the college community can then receive direct benefits such as program development and even training/employment growth.

Miles (2010) study on Community College presidents’ feelings and thoughts on student governance and leadership lead to the realization that with administration support students who wanted to take on leadership did so with enthusiasm and goals for improving the overall community. “When working collaboratively with students, administrators are in a unique position to create positive change” (Miles, 2010, p. 85). With the assistance of student affairs staff, these partnerships can be forged and students can lead to positive change on the campuses and then move beyond the campus upon degree completion.

The Role Diversity Plays on Student Governance and Leadership

There is evidence in the literature and research that women, minorities and others, many due to sexual orientation, have overlooked the benefits of participating in student government on college campuses. Kraus and Miller (2004) studied women in college student governance and found that women either chose not run for governmental office. The reasons for not running
seemed to indicate lack of interest, however, no institutional support of women’s issues; or they felt they did not have the qualifications to run for office appointment (Kraus and Miller, 2004). There is a need for female mentors and role models on campuses to assist those women interested in governance and leadership to go to for advice and skill obtainment. “Due to women’s limited leadership roles in the highest echelons of business and government, it is vital that institutions of higher education, especially programs that are predominately female, consider ways to incorporate leadership development throughout the undergraduate experience” (Marcketti and Kadolph, 2010, p. 137).

Dugan, Komives and Segar (2008) completed a study looking specifically at leadership development among women, African-Americans and Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual (LGB) students. Again, it was indicated that women did not tend to run for governing offices similar to the study completed by Kraus and Miller (2004). African-Americans did run for office, but felt that they were not given nor did they receive the same leadership development that their White counterparts did on campus (Dugan, Komives and Segar, 2008). Unfortunately, the LGB students did not report much about leadership opportunities nor development and truly expressed that more needs to be done for this population in reference to leadership development (Dugan, Komives and Segar, 2008). “Stereotype threat is a particularly powerful phenomenon that potentially decreased the willingness of individuals from underrepresented populations to assume leadership roles” (Dugan, Komives and Segar, 2008, p. 492).

Miles (2010) study on Community College views on student leadership and government also indicated that since many Community Colleges are populated with underrepresented populations that this would be the area to study at these institutions to see how successful these populations are in roles of leadership. “More and more students who enroll in Community
College will be members of underrepresented groups, including individuals with disabilities, students of color and low-income students. Students from all backgrounds can benefit from campus involvement in leadership activities” (Miles, 2010, p. 84). Kempf (2001) studied the effects of holding college leadership positions on Latina students. Her work indicated that there was a positive impact on the student’s academics, social life and professional development. This study also demonstrated the need for further research on how students of underrepresented populations and the impact of leadership have upon their learned skill set in the future (Kempf, 2011).

Other items such as student mentors, training and experience of underrepresented study leaders should have been explored as well. Arminio, Carter, Jones, Kruger, Lucas, Washington, Young and Scott (2000) additionally looked at leadership experiences of students of color during their college years. This study found that not all leadership programs speak the same language or language that is understandable by all students. Language needs to focus on involvement and commitment not on hierarchical structure. Collaboration also should be focused on as a positive development and by using mentors from similar backgrounds in relation to the underrepresented students; specifically students of color could more easily identify the skills. Lastly, Arminio, et. al. (2000) stated that further research needs to be done that includes the intersection of race and gender to acknowledge the limitations.

In the literature there was one particular study that did indeed review the impact of gender and ethnic identity in understanding and developing student leadership. Kezar and Moriarity (2000) reviewed the impact of gender and ethnic identity and found that learned skills among men and women would not need to change, but perceived ability would need to be developed, especially for women. Self-perception had the biggest impact on the results found in
this study. Kezar and Moriarity’s (2000) study indicates that research needs to be conducted to examine why there is importance placed on positional leadership specifically tied to African-American women. These examples from the literature, therefore, highly indicate that there is yet another area that has potential for development among underrepresented populations, yet needs further investigations from researchers in the future.

**Summation**

“Leadership is a social process because it involves interaction with other people and can be developed by practicing in a safe environment” (Gehert, 2010, p. 1). Leadership skills must be developed through a process as was clearly stated in all of the research that was reviewed for this analysis. Regardless of definition or method of leadership, student governance on college campuses is present but, unfortunately, not researched or reviewed enough at this time. “A student’s definition of leadership may play a significant role in whether the student perceives herself as a leader” (Marcketti, and Kadolph, 2010, p. 131). The perception that a student has of herself can be developed through good mentors and encouragement of others on the college campus. There needs to be campus personnel willing to step up and encourage the perception and then the development of leaders on the college campuses.

Gehert (2010), Marcketti and Kadolph (2010) and Kraus and Miller (2004) all indicated that there is much more to be researched pertaining to leadership development and student governance in higher education. “Because a connection between campus involvement and academic performance is accepted in traditional four-year institutions of higher education, Community College could benefit from exploring and encouraging that involvement. One form of that involvement may be student governance” (Miles, 2010, p. 84).
Student governance is one form of leadership development that, per the research, is understudied and underutilized on college campuses. Workplace skills in addition to a college degree could, and should, make a student more marketable as well as a better citizen. These, therefore, are the skills that need to be further developed, even if that development is outside of the classroom. “A better understanding of the process and outcomes of student participation in higher education settings is required if we are to take full advantage of its potential value” (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009, p. 69).

Gehert (2010) eluded that in the past ten years, universities have taken some responsibility to develop leadership development courses and opportunities. However, having noted that the research also stated that there are many students who may want to gain the skills or have the opportunities, but it just does not occur. The future of democracy and development of leaders could be occurring on the college campuses. Future research should look at successful programs and uncover a manner for mass distribution of such successes so more students can take advantage of positive leadership and governance opportunities.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The purpose of this narrative study (Creswell, 2007) was to describe how opportunities to engage and participate in student leadership leads to higher educational success, including increased retention and completion rates among Community College students, many of whom are members of underrepresented populations including those based on race, ethnicity and/or socioeconomic status. In this chapter, I will provide a description of why a qualitative research study was selected for the study, the research paradigm, and the research design. The chapter will also describe participant selection, data collection, storage, and management and analysis procedures as well as efforts undertaken to promote the trustworthiness of the study. The research questions are as follows:

- Why do self-identified, underrepresented students engage and actively participate in student leadership opportunities at the Community College?
- How do self-identified, underrepresented students who engage and actively participate in student leadership opportunities describe their current experiences in leadership and academics?
- How do self-identified, underrepresented students who engage and actively participate in student leadership opportunities describe the connection between their Community College experience (academics and student leadership) with their future plans?

Research Paradigm

An interpretive paradigm (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson, 2002) was utilized so that stories can be told in participants’ voices with their thoughts and concerns brought
forward. Participants were able to review their stories before moving forward to ensure that those stories are told as the participant had viewed or lived the experience, and in their words. Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002) describe the utilization of qualitative research as a method to describe and explain persons’ experiences, behavior and interactions to better able others to understand them. They go on further to describe the interpretive paradigm as one that assists in understanding social life and to aid in describing how people construct social meaning within their lives. By allowing people to tell their stories it gives purpose and creates better self-awareness. Participants in the study feel good about what they have contributed to the research area (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson, 2002). This is the correct and most meaningful manner to obtain information about how leadership impacts students as the students themselves will be the storytellers and their voices are the privileged ones which shall be heard throughout the data collection and analysis.

**Research Design**

This study is a qualitative, narrative study whereby students’ voices will be heard as they described and told their stories pertaining to their experiences as Community College students, as underrepresented students and as leaders on campus. Individual interviews were held with each participant so that he or she could tell their story in their own words (Creswell, 2007). The stories told were reviewed between researcher and participant to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2007).

Clandinin and Connelly (1989) discuss narrative research methods as the simplest manner to retell stories of actual experiences as told by the participants. The ability to focus on the stories to understand and account for the experiences will allow for meaningful research in order to answer the research questions. The retelling of the experiences of these students who
have been involved in leadership and are self-declared members of underrepresented populations can allow these students to share their experiences and to use those stories to help others to excel in leadership as well as in academics.

**Research Tradition**

Good meaningful research needs to have a rigorous approach in its design and implantation that includes well thought out implementation, effective data collection and thorough analysis and interpretation of the data collected (Fossey, Harvey McDermott and Davidson, 2002). The ability to interview students who have experienced a role in leadership and the impact it has or has not made will give valuable information for many higher educational institutions to utilize to improve retention and the overall college experience for underrepresented students.

Clandinin and Connelly (1989) discussed how narrative inquiry allows for both a persons’ lived stories and their ongoing experiential text. This opportunity can allow for the stories to be told in context of the current timeframe, but then allow for those stories to be told to others who can gain knowledge from the stories to develop their own lived text.

This method allows the researcher to spend considerable time with participants gathering their stories. Besides using spoken word this method also allows for the use of other materials such as journals, letters, photos, and other artifacts to record the experiences (Creswell, 2007). Through the gathering of information, via the participants’ stories, the researcher will also gain cultural and historical perspectives, remembering to maintain the integrity and chronological order of the stories when they are told through the written word of the researcher (Creswell, 2007).
By utilizing this method the study interviewed students in order to gather information about their experiences as Community College students, as student leaders and as members of an underrepresented group. At one point during the interviews, an artifact brought to the interview by the participant was discussed. This provided further explanation and opportunity for the student to discuss their personal experiences as well as maintain a comfort level for the student in sharing the personal experiences that he has lived.

**Participants**

All participants of this study are currently enrolled two-year degree-seeking students from an underrepresented group (based on race, ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status) from Mohawk Valley Community College who actively participate in student leadership through Student Congress or as a leader of a student-operated club/organization. It was hopeful to have a diversified group including a mix of male, female, differing age groups and differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the study. Given the national statistical data that: 46% of all enrolled Community College students are members of an ethnic minority (Ortiz, 2000), and that the population of students attending Community Colleges traditionally consist of a diverse group including: more older students, women, members of diverse ethnic or racial groups, employed either full or part time and likely to be first generation college attending students (Bragg, 2001), there should not be any issue in locating students who meet the criteria of being an underrepresented Community College student engaged in leadership at Mohawk Valley Community College.
Recruitment and Access

Students were recruited by the researcher who is employed at the local Community College as the Director of Student Engagement and Outreach. As the Student Congress Advisor, I briefly described the study (Appendix A) at a general meeting of Student Congress and informed them that they would receive an email invitation (Appendix B) to participate. The email invitation described the study and asked students to respond via email if they wished to participate. After the students’ responses were received, a sampling of seven students were chosen to participate. Once the students agreed to participate an initial interview date was chosen with each individual student at a location agreed upon by the student. The students choose the location as long as it is quiet and private. The interviewer would choose a location if requested to do so by the students. The consent form (Appendix C) was signed at the first interview.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007) and artifacts analysis (Creswell, 2007) were conducted for this study. Open-ended interviews occurred, were recorded and then transcribed into written documents.

Interview one (Appendix D) with each participant asked about his or her Community College experience and reasons for choosing to attend Community College. More specifically, students were asked about their reasons for choosing Community College, their experiences so far with advisement, registration, courses, faculty, staff, and if residential their experiences as a student residing on campus. The second interview (Appendix E) focused upon the student’s leadership experiences. At this interview the participant was also asked to bring an artifact with them to show or assist them in discussing their experiences or reasons for being drawn to
leadership opportunities on campus. The artifact or document represented the student’s Community College experience, leadership experience or a combination of both that can be utilized to tell their story. The third and final interview (Appendix F) focused on the student’s academics, interests and future goals. This included a discussion about what experiences the student has had and how they feel they have or have not benefited from these experiences academically, socially and professionally.

All interviews were recorded using an electronic device that was transcribed via the Internet. The interviewer collected and transcribed all of the interviews in order to maintain confidentiality with and between all participants. Permission (Appendix C) was obtained from each participant before any recording of the conversations occurred.

Data Storage

Data gathered from the interviews were stored on an electronic recording device such as a smartphone that was then downloaded to a computer. The researcher transcribed the interviews and all recordings were destroyed once transcribed. In the process of getting any and all data transcribed the recordings were kept in a secure locations that were not accessible by anyone other than the researcher. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to protect the confidentiality and rights of all involved.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in three phases so that all of the interviews could be coded and analyzed for accuracy and relevance. The analysis of the data incorporated some InVivo coding, when there was a need to take a quote directly from an interview, as well as in two cycles within...
each phase. These two phases incorporated single words or short sentences in cycle one and in
cycle two the portions code will be longer passages from the interviews (Saldaña, 2009).

Open coding, or coding in the words of the participants, was the first phase of coding that
was done. In this phase coding was done in reference to labeling or categorizing similar
responses. Questions (what, where, how, when and how much) were asked and comparisons
made in reference to the responses (Pandit, 1996).

The interviewer coded each line, but as Saldaña (2009) recommends, specifically noted:
cultural practices episodes, encounters, roles and social types, groups/cliques, organizations
settlement and habitats and subcultures and lifestyles. These categories helped to place data
gathered into succinct areas in order to analyze similarities and differences. This coding process
lead to the development of the next stage of coding which was theme coding.

Theme coding, or coding by collapsing lines to develop themes based on common factors
occurred after open coding had been completed. Once the open coding was completed then
coding items put the data together separately then categorizing by common words and finally
moving them together by locating common themes among the categories.

Single words or terms may form the single code but then a theme may develop if multiple
participants start to use the same terms according to Saldaña, (2009). For example, students may
indicate that it was family that encouraged them to participate in leadership, but then the theme
develops that it was not just any family member but the matriarch of the family unit, or mother.

Provisional Coding (Saldaña, 2009) in the last phase of coding was based on Leadership
Development Theory (Komives et al., 2006), and how it relates to the leadership development
and retention of the students involved in the study. Coding at this stage looked to see what stage
the student is in as compared to Leadership Development Theory. Leadership development theory indicates that students will follow a path of development going through the following phases: awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identification, leadership differentiation, generativity and finally integration/synthesis into leadership (Komives et al., 2006). Coding at this phase determined where the student was in their development of leadership per this theory at the time of the interviews.

Data was collected for each student via individual interviews and each interview was analyzed separately. The artifact collected, during the second interview, was analyzed in the same manner. Each of the above-mentioned phases of coding occurred for interviews one, two and three for each participant individually. Then all participants’ interview data was collapsed and analyzed together in order to look at the entire group for commonalities and differences.

**Trustworthiness**

Member checking will be conducted for each participant in order to validate the data (Saldaña, 2009). During member checking, each participant will be read the findings from their interviews and be asked if it is indeed accurate or not.

Researcher bias as mentioned previously was reviewed in order to add validity to the findings. Attending to positionality became especially important because similar to participants I was an underrepresented student and I currently hold the position at the college of Director of Student Engagement and Outreach. In this position the researcher oversees student governance and leadership and therefore works closely with many of these students.
Utilizing a narrative design (Creswell, 2007) promoted trustworthiness of the study because it allowed for the stories to be told by each individual participant and therefore all points and information gathered came from the voice of the participants (Creswell, 2007).
Chapter 4

Results

Stories from students and their experiences provide practitioners and educators opportunities to better understand the student population as well as gain access to real information as seen through the true life experiences of the students (Bragg, 2001). According to Creswell (2000), “All of the individuals need to have stories to tell about their lived experiences” (p. 128). Through the stories of the students those who engage with them, work with them and guide them can gain a real understanding of the impact that experiences in and out of the classroom have upon students (Bers and Smith, 1991). The stories that were gathered can begin to assist educators to understand how the experiences of the students either help or hinder their progress within the higher education system (Bers and Smith, 1991).

In order to understand the experience of underrepresented students participating in Community College student leadership seven students, who had self-identified as underrepresented, were each interviewed three times. Students answered questions and explained in their own words how being underrepresented, a leader and attending Community College have influenced them as they try to achieve their goals. The data was transcribed and coded in accordance with Saldaña (2009) and emergent themes identified for further discussion.
Individual Student Interviews

Student 1: Gavin

Background

Gavin is a twenty-five year-old returning adult student. Gavin is currently serving as President of Student Congress at the Community College. This is his first semester as President of the student governing body at the college. As President he has to complete ten office hours a week; oversee a weekly Executive Board session with the other members of the Executive Board; as well as monitor/lead, including writing the agenda of the weekly Student Congress meeting. As President of Student Congress he also meets monthly with all of the Vice Presidents of the college to express student concerns and to obtain any concerns of the staff and faculty.

Gavin identifies as a white transgender student; he was born a female but identifies as a male and is currently undergoing hormone therapy while waiting for funding to have surgery to complete his transition to male. Before attending the Community College Gavin did attend a four-year university but due to expenses he was forced to stop attending, move home and begin working. When he had enough money he left home, continued working and enrolled in the Human Services program at the local Community College. Enrolling in the Community College allowed him to maintain his apartment and job while also attending school to work towards a professional certification with hopes of one day acquiring his MSW.

High school or pre-college reflections

Gavin had been the captain of his basketball and softball teams in high school and thought that being on a team would make him feel a part of something and that he could be accepted for who he was as a person. When he first decided to play football he had a female
friend who agreed to also be on the team, however, when it came to actually participating she backed out and he was left being the only female on the team. He joined the team to be able to participate in something he enjoyed, but also to be accepted by his peers. In the end however, Gavin stated that he had been treated differently, being the only female to play football, because of his status as a female at that time and he felt that he lost some of his drive to be involved as a team member.

**Former college reflections**

Since he could not enlist in the military, due to his transition from female to male, Gavin elected to attend a four-year university right from high school. While at that university he joined the rugby team to find a group to accept him. As a member of that group they nominated him to be the treasurer and he was in charge of all fund raising. However, the rugby team had excessive parties and used money unethically to support their entertainment. Therefore, he had to make a choice to separate from this group or remain which to him meant stay with people who he had found accepting of him, but made what he felt were unethical decisions, or to locate some other group that would accept him.

**Community College reflections**

Gavin was not happy at the university and chose to move back home to decide what he should do with his future. Moving home was a hard obstacle to overcome too as Gavin stated, “I knew I wouldn’t have as much support from my family as I would have liked, so a smaller setting and smaller goal two years versus four years at college seemed more realistic”. Therefore Gavin started looking for someone or a small group to accept him as a student, as a transgender adult and as a person. He thought he could find acceptance by attending Community College.
Getting involved in leadership, originally as a member of and then officer in the GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) at the Community College allowed Gavin to locate people who accepted him for the person he is and placed no expectations upon him. Gavin took on the leadership of the club due to the encouragement of the Club Advisor and his Professor who encouraged Gavin to be who he felt most comfortable being while attending Community College.

**Student 2: Dana**

**Background**

Dana is a traditional college aged black female student in her third semester of coursework at the local Community College. Dana is a psychology major and wants to complete her associate’s degree and then look to perhaps further her education to work towards becoming an Academic/Guidance Counselor. She currently serves as a delegate for the Anime Club. Being the delegate means that Dana represents her club at all weekly Student Congress meetings and speaks on behalf of her club. As the delegate, it is her responsibility to not only represent her club at the larger Student Congress meeting, but to take all information from that meeting back to her club and report the occurrence. In this capacity she connects her club to the greater student governing body and reports to the larger body that her club is following policy and procedures overseen by Student Congress. Due to her current involvement, Dana is also participating in a leadership development series sponsored by the Student Activities office. Dana hopes that by attending the series of workshops she can grow her leadership skills and perhaps consider involvement in other leadership opportunities on campus.

**High school or pre-college reflections**
Dana entered college directly after graduating from high school. She had applied at other schools, but financially could not afford to attend any other school. If she wanted to leave the area the only option she had would have been to return to Chicago, where she had originally lived, but with that move came a family obligation; caring for her grandmother. Unpleasant memories however, of her former troubles in school, caused her to rethink returning to Chicago to care for her grandmother and to attend Community College there. Dana shared the following; “I had a lot of problems in school since very early and did not get tested while we lived in Chicago. My teachers told my mom I was lazy and that’s how I failed third grade. We then moved to Indiana for a short time and that was where they tested me and discovered I had a learning disability. I was twelve that that time”. Once the family relocated to New York, Dana prospered as a student and therefore chose to remain in the community where she had gotten help in school enabling her to graduate from high school.

**Community College reflections**

Dana feels she is not only underrepresented because she is black and receives full financial aid to attend Community College, but also because Anime is not a mainstream interest. As she stated “Because the club I am in and represent is not popular and people look down on those who watch Anime, I feel the need to stand up for it as it is not just wanting cartoons but it’s a different culture”.

Through her college experiences Dana has “learned to work with people that I never would have worked with or hung out with and due to that experience I see how I enjoy helping people”. Also while attending Community College, Dana learned about the resources such as the Learning Center (on-site tutoring center that is free to all students) and that “there are a lot of people here willing to help students. At no other school have I had this extent of help with my
learning disability”, and due to these experiences Dana has decided that she wants to give back by helping others.

Dana values the help others have given, especially since she feels labeled as different due to her appearance as well as interest in Anime. “I love helping people and some people just don’t see the best in themselves”. She sees the differences in how people are treated and assumptions made when you are seen as different; hence she wants to help others who are viewed as different succeed. “I love helping people and if I am not helping others than I do not feel as though I am accomplishing anything. The club I am in is different and not popular, therefore people look down on us. I feel the need to stand up for it and my members”. In return the club, and her leadership role, is helping her develop social and leadership skills while attending Community College.

**Student 3: Christina**

**Background**

Christina is a traditional college aged, dark skinned-Hispanic female currently in her fourth semester of college. She currently serves as Vice President of the Gospel Choir Club, delegate to Student Congress for the Gospel Choir Club, student representative to the Auxiliary Services Board (the board that oversees the campus bookstore and other privately operated entities on campus) and has begun participating in the leadership development series sponsored by the Student Activities office. Christina also works for Sodexo, the food service company on the college campus. Her involvement is vast, varied and she tends to agree to participate in anything where she can become more involved in the college community.

**High school or pre-college reflections**
In high school Christina was involved in the Future Leaders of America Club and was the secretary of Nubians United. These were her primary involvements in high school due to family obligations as the daughter of a military mom who was shipped overseas for several tours of duty during Christina’s high school years. Since she was involved in these two clubs at school, the administration of the school also suggested she participate in a leadership development institute that was supported by a local college fraternity. Christina said she enjoyed these experiences as it allowed her to help others in her own community however family always came first because she knew her mom counted on her to help while she was deployed.

**Community College reflections**

At the Community College the first organization that Christina became involved with was Student Congress. She felt that by getting involved at the student delegate or representative level she could learn what opportunities there were on the campus in a quiet manner, until she gained confidence to speak up. After gaining her confidence Christina began to ask questions and to get more involved. Christina said, “I speak up in a respectable manner and not come off too strong, but I speak up. I try to speak up as others feel they don’t have a voice”. Her experiences at the Community College have drawn her to organizing the gospel choir club, but to also begin to take on other leadership roles in hopes of encouraging others to also get involved.

When asked to bring in an object to show what impacts her as a leader and person, Christina brought in a medallion, the Armor of God. “When you step out you put on the Armor of God. It has the breastplate of righteousness, helmet of salvation, shield of faith, loins of truth, feet of the gospel and sword of the spirit. I believe in truth and hate liars. Try to be as honest as you can be in all aspects of life. These are the characteristics I believe in and in turn how I represent in leadership”.

The medallion represents Christina’s faith and also her strength, which comes from her Mom, as the medallion was a gift from her Mom. Christina believes in honesty and doing good things to benefit all. Getting involved in leadership has occurred, according to Christina, “because people always talk to me and express how they feel about things in school, in the community.” People who are around her know that she has great faith and that she wants to see the good in all.

**Student 4: Leah**

**Background**

Leah is a mixed race returning adult female to the Community College campus in her fourth semester of college. She feels she is underrepresented in the Community College student body, as she is a high school dropout and a convicted felon. Currently she participates in many avenues of leadership including: serving as a mentor in CSTEP (NYS Collegiate Science and Technology Program for underrepresented students designed to offer assistance to complete their degrees), tutor in Gear-Up (a federally funded Trio program assisting high school students to succeed and transition to college), an Honors Project participant (assigned a mentor to conduct independent research on a topic of interest) and as Secretary of the club ATOME (All Things Mother Earth: A Science Club). Leah’s involvement in many of these groups attribute to her desire to learn and to grow as a person all while seeking to improve her community.

**High school or pre-college reflections**

As a high school dropout and having a GED Leah said she knew that Community College would be her best option for obtaining a degree. Leah knew she would need to seek out help to improve her skills. She was aware that her math skills needed improvement and that she had to
learn to be a student again. By no means, however, did Leah ever think that Community College would be easy, nor did she want it to be easy.

Leah never took the easy path even before she completed her GED or entering Community College. At the age of 17, she found herself volunteering in New Orleans helping victims of Hurricane Katrina. She took on the lead role of organizing college student volunteers who gave up their Spring Break to help. She said, “I was held accountable, responsible and performed as a leader in a community that was without a community or a leader”.

**Community College reflections**

Due to her past felony conviction, financing an education has become a constant battle. However Leah persevered and stated, “CSTEP, Honors program and having instructor who are willing to work on weekends, extend office hours to give extra help, and the Learning Center tutors, with all of this I have been able to overcome obstacles. Also I have a mentor who has helped me with independent research and I’ve learned so much about working in a lab and I will take that experience and learn more.” Overcoming obstacles has allowed Leah to grow and for others to see her as a leader and mentor. Leah learned these skills by first finding those on the Community College campus who could mentor her and provide challenges to her that have ultimately lead to opportunities for growth, personally and academically.

**Student 5: Rebecca**

**Background**

Rebecca is a traditional college-aged white female who receives maximum financial aid, including the maximum allowance from PELL and New York State Tuition Assistance Program, due to low family income. She is currently in her fourth and final semester in pursuit of an
associate’s degree in biology. Rebecca currently serves as the Vice President of Student Congress. In this position she is responsible for hosting 10 office hours a week, checking the attendance of the student delegates and for visiting individual club meetings to assist clubs in following policies and procedures including Robert’s Rules of Order. Prior to being Vice President of Student Congress, Rebecca was instrumental in reformulating the Recreation Club previously and creating a new club, Hiking Club, as a way to help more students get engaged and involved in activities on campus. At home Rebecca is given additional duties similar to being a second Mom. Rebecca stated that “she didn’t think of any other alternatives to attending Community College and I didn’t want to think about any other alternatives”. Her family is a very important part of her life and one of her largest sources of support is her mom.

High school or pre-college reflections

Rebecca attended the local high school, was captain of the Cross-Country team and treasurer of Band. She had never considered attending college any place except at the local Community College. Being the oldest female child in a single parent household with six children, Rebecca knew her Mom depended on her for help with the household and her younger siblings. She was many times left in charge of the family household when she was not at the high school or running cross-country meets. Her family obligations were important to the functioning of the family and to Rebecca personally.

Community College reflections

Rebecca sees herself similar to any other college student, however is aware that others see her as different. “I was told I am considered underrepresented because I receive full financial aid including PELL and NYS TAP. But I don’t think it is a disadvantage, that I receive the aid. It covers all my costs, I live at home with my Mom and younger siblings and it’s giving me time to
think about what I want to do”. So in light of how other categorize her, Rebecca is satisfied with her life and does not see any disadvantage but rather sees it as an advantage economically as well as developmentally for herself.

At the Community College Rebecca takes care of others by fixing clubs that are not functioning well and bringing them back to a state of functionality. Rebecca continues to observe and mentor the clubs by offering to teach them how to run efficient meetings and research fundraising ideas. She carries out her responsibilities as a daughter, student and Student Congress Officer very diligently and seriously.

**Student 6: Marcellus**

**Background**

Marcellus is a black male, in his late forties, that also identifies as a military veteran and convicted felon. He has returned to attend Community College, even though he already has a bachelor’s degree, as he is unable to utilize his degree due to his criminal conviction. Marcellus is able to return to college at this time due to his veteran status, which assists him financially to have the ability to be a student. In his final semester, Marcellus currently serves as President of the Chemical Dependency Club.

**High school or pre-college reflections**

According to Marcellus, the placement of responsibility occurred very early in high school. In high school Marcellus stated, “Coach came to me and asked me to be on the track team. He said that if I was on the team then other black males would join the team and follow my lead”. Even in his younger years others sought Marcellus out to take on leadership roles as
he ignited others to follow. These early experiences stuck with him throughout the years leading him towards positions that involved responsibility and leadership within a group.

Former college reflections

Marcellus was very eager to share his story of how he ended up attending Community College. He stated the following, “I am an older returning student. I already have a bachelor’s degree but when I was in my 40’s I picked up a felony. This lead to the termination of my job and I had to get over that and came back to school to rectify that mistake. Not getting a job I wanted due to my record, I decided I need to go into a field where I could be accepted, and allowed to work with others in similar situations: I needed to make lemonade from the lemons. Once you lose your integrity it’s the worst feeling in the world. I want to help others and prevent myself also from going down that path as it took me ten years to return from it”. While attending a four-year college Marcellus did participate in leadership and was always considered a leader. He felt that being involved is what motivated him to graduate and being successful in the field of study he had chosen at that time.

Community College reflections

In his current situation he stated, “Being a student leader, as President of the Chemical Dependency Club, has made me stronger in my resolve not to engage in activities that got me into trouble previously. I encourage others to get involved. See where you fit in and can make you a better, better-rounded student. See all types of people, ages, races, etc. Get involved and don’t feel overwhelmed. Involvement lessens the tension and apprehension about being a student.” Marcellus understands that by being involved he gets a better opportunity to get to know the faculty as well as members of the community. He has taken these opportunities to
network as a means to an end, which will hopefully lead him to future employment in a professional setting within the local community.

**Student 7: Shanelle**

**Background**

Shanelle is a traditional college-aged black woman in her fourth semester of college. Her leadership involvement includes her roles as a mentor in CSTEP/STEP, active member of PTK (Honor Society) and as an active member in the Otaku Haven Club. Shanelle was also asked to participate in an upcoming leadership series being sponsored by Student Activities on campus due to her involvement as a peer mentor. She has the ability to recognize when she can share her talents and when she has to pull back so that she can succeed in reaching her goals in life.

**High school or pre-college reflections**

In high school, Shanelle did not specifically participate in leadership; instead she focused on getting good grades so that she could graduate from high school. Shanelle did however take time to volunteer to help others in the community. She helped at the local library reading to young children and to people with disabilities. When time was available she also did activities with these individuals whom she felt just wanted someone to spend time with them. These experiences encouraged her to look for the good in others and to help them see what they had to offer to others as well.

**Community College reflections**

Choosing to attend Community College for Shanelle was an economic one. “It was close to home and less expensive than if I rushed into applying and going to a four-year school”. Alternatives were presented however, Shanelle made it very clear that she is the one who chose
to attend Community College over the other schools that she perhaps could have chosen to attend. Shanelle is looking to graduate and then transfer, but is taking her time to figure out exactly what she wants to study and make as a career. “This was not a waste of time but has broadened my horizons. High school does not really prepare you for college but this experience has prepared me”.

The reason for attending Community College for Shanelle also does not have to do with family, as Shanelle has no family support. Shanelle stated, “I get my support from my colleagues at college, as I don’t get support from home. Some advisors, and not necessarily mine, CSTEP and advisors in the Student Services Center help me when I am in need of support and am indecisive.” Through networking, Shanelle has learned to locate support on campus and does not hold tight to labels, such as underrepresented, that may be placed upon her.

**Emergent themes from interviews**

Seven themes emerged through the course of the interviews with these students: acceptance, differences, labels, challenges, win-win, second chances, and involvement. The interview results relevant to each of these themes are presented below.

**Acceptance**

All seven of the students choose to attend Community College, as it appeared to be the only option available where they could get an education, gain some skills, and be accepted. At the Community College they were accepted and treated the same as all other students at the college. Community College gave them a community where their abilities, disabilities and differences were noted, but did not penalize them, rather allowed them to explore their abilities and to nurture those out of classroom skills in leadership.
Acceptance, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is “the quality or state of being accepted or acceptable” retrieved January 26, 2015, from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acceptance. Many of the students interviewed discussed the notion of seeking acceptance at the Community College generally due to the lack of acceptance they had previously found from their peers, families, and others in their lives. The students stories told how they sought out the acceptance of others as each student was well aware of their uniqueness but sought others to also be aware and accepting. Once they were accepted these students were able to begin their journey to leadership that then allowed them to make connections with faculty, staff and other professionals therefore encouraging them to continue not only leadership roles but also their educational goals. This answers the question why they should get involved in leadership at the Community College: acceptance.

Gavin’s experiences, beginning with his family, denoted his struggles with acceptance. Gavin summed his desire for acceptance best through the discussion pertaining to the artifact he was asked to bring to one of the interviews. Gavin described his artifact as follows: “My tattoo is the symbol for transgender. It symbolizes gender neutrality. It has influenced me as it gets people talking.” For Gavin, being transgender is central to who he is. He wants to be accepted for who he is, and he sees himself as having a role in helping people accept him. He goes on to say that “Most people are not out; they pass and don’t talk about it. I have had people approach me and say “hey, me too”. I’ve even had faculty comment and tell me it was “cool”. As such, Gavin uses himself as way to bring people into conversation and to connect with people having a similar experience. It was having others see his tattoo and accept him for himself that has allowed him to open up to others.
By being accepted, Dana has grown to accept her learning disability, to accept the services available to her on campus and to grow relationships with others who have similar interests. Being accepted for who she is, even with her learning deficiencies, Dana has found her college experience to be enjoyable and a true learning experience. Through her college experiences Dana has “learned to work with people that I never would have worked with or hung out with and due to that experience I see how I enjoy helping people”. Also while attending Community College Dana has learned about the resources such as the Learning Center (on site tutoring center that is free to all students) and that “there are a lot of people here willing to help students. At no other school have I had this extent of help with my learning disability”. Dana has decided that she wants to give back by helping others due to the experiences she has had at the Community College.

**Differences**

All of the students interviewed acknowledged that they felt they were seen as different, either due to the color of their skin, their sexual identity, their criminal records or financial situation. Being from an underrepresented group (or being different due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or socio-economic status), many of the students stated that they were not supposed to succeed. When these students were informed of assistance they could receive due to belonging to an underrepresented group, they felt that their difference meant they had a lower likelihood of success.

Christina, when asked about being seen as different stated, “I am a happy go lucky person. I try to see positive and not pull out the negative because it won’t get you any where”, however she did also tell of instances where this negativity and attitude of disrespect is present on the college campus.
There are some lazy teachers. Some just discuss their experiences, does not teach the material or check homework, doesn’t review homework, just gives work in class and there is no connection. I’ve even spent 30 minutes in the class while instructor was on the phone. This was wasted time. This is very challenging then I am expected to learn the material and they are going to test me on it. I read the book but if there is no one to discuss it with how do I know I understand the material. It makes it very difficult. If I schedule a 3-hour class and then am released after 90 minutes something is not right. What are we going to do, graduate with A’s and expect us to know stuff in the field that we don’t and can’t do our jobs? Set up for failure is what it is.

Christina has supports in and out of the college community however, from the statement above there is an underlying feeling of pressure Christina feels coming the overarching hierarchy that those who are seen as different in the classroom shall fail. Christina stated, “I have two teachers, the Learning Center and my Mom to go to for support. My Mom however is five hours away so it is support from a distance”.

As a transgender returning adult student Gavin indicated that his being a member of an underrepresented group has however made a positive impact on his ability to lead. He said that he felt that he has the ability to be unbiased and to look at things from all sides. “I consider everyone before I make decisions, I consider religion, races, sexuality, etc., and I considered it all”. It is due to his life experiences, his own differing views, opinions and abilities that Gavin states he can be the voice of the diverse student population at the college. “It’s easy to assume that you don’t have a say because you are told that your whole life. Your opinion does matter and getting involved gives you the opportunity for change. Allows you to change, appreciate things and allows for growth and have the ability to set a presence go future students who are experiencing the same issues”

According to Dana, the challenges that those who are different face are unique too. “Maybe its judgment from other students because of one’s interests or friends. I have heard others talking about my club as weird, dropouts, and potheads, all due to our common interest in
Anime. I hope to open others eyes and not be so judgmental, but it can’t be forced.” These are how these students are seen as different and yet as Dana indicated they are not different they just have different hobbies. In the end they have the same goal, completing their education at the Community College.

When interviewed, Leah noted the significance in learning to be tolerant of the differences of others. “In previous years I tended to surround myself with like-minded people and now I have learned that people are at their own level and we need to share and have patience to learn about and from each other.” Learning to be tolerant of others opinions, views and even in research to allow for errors have helped Leah to learn the tolerance she feels is needed for mentors and leaders on campus to be successful. These skills she has learned are skills that will also be necessary to succeed in the workplace, community and in life. Differences in others create an atmosphere of acceptance of others differences creating a more unified community.

Labels

Many of the students interviewed just wanted to blend in and almost escape the labels that they feel were placed upon them by society, family or other individuals. They wanted to be seen as students not as individuals’ labeled due to the color of their skin, sexual identity or economic status.

Shanelle was first asked the question about being a member of an underrepresented group when she completed her original application to participate in CSTEP and she said that she had to ask for clarification. Shanelle did not place labels on others but was aware of the labels that others had placed upon her. Shanelle responded to the question during this interview by stating the following, “I do not consider myself an underrepresented student even though I am a young black women; it is a label attached to me by others. I am the same as any other students.” I want
to have a good GPA and do well so I can obtain my degree, and then transfer to another school and obtain a bachelor’s degree.”

Attending Community College can also place a label on a student. Shanelle was firm in acknowledging that it was her choice to attend Community College. “It was close to home and less expensive than if I had rushed into applying to a four-year school. It was the right economical choice, not because I am black or too stupid to attend a four-year college”.

Christina stated, “I think being labeled as underrepresented, puts more of a pressure to uphold a standard and do things in a manner most people would not exist. Need to prove others wrong and succeed.” Christina looks to maintain leadership to prove to those she feels have labeled her negatively that she has enough faith in herself and in others to succeed.

Dana seeks opportunities to continue her growth. This continued growth also allows her to show others they can overcome and have an opportunity to be successful. “Some people go on telling you that you can’t do this or that. My grandfather told my mother she would be a man’s whore and she’d never make it anywhere nor have a man or job. So when my Mom was growing up and when I was younger he would say to me that I’d grow up to be just like my mother and not go to college. He told me I’d be a high school dropout and I proved him wrong. When I was struggling I was trying to prove to him and now decided not to care what he says and to do what I need to do to make it.”

**Challenges**

The students, in their interviews proposed that they chose to attend Community College, in many cases, to prove that they could overcome obstacles, work through the challenges and become participating positive members of their family and/or community. None of the students said that they were seeking an easy means to get to their goals but that they were seeking the
opportunity reach their goals and indicated Community College was providing the opportunity for them. By finding a mentor on the college campus and feeling as though someone was willing to help them achieve their goals, these student leaders noted the importance of giving back and helping others to rise above all obstacles in order to overcome any setbacks that a student may encounter.

In their interviews these students considered engagement or involvement at the college as important for students to overcome the challenges of being a student. Dana explained how challenging it could be to get involved at the college initially. “I met an incoming freshman who said he didn’t feel like he fit in anyplace. I had him go to Club Day. He joined a club that he had never considered and now he wants to be involved in a lot of different things. I encouraged him to join Student Congress to voice his opinions and now he thinks he has a voice in multiple things occurring on campus”.

Getting involved, as Dana showed through this example, can open doors for students to evolve and gain confidence that can help them overcome the challenges that they may face as students. “Get involved; it opens doors. Something about getting involved makes you feel important so why wouldn’t I do it all over again? But, be your own advocate. At college you have no Mom or Dad who can do it for you”. The involvement that Dana has had so far in her college career has incorporated her desire to help others to overcome the challenges they face. By getting involved, Dana explains to them, they develop a support system to help them overcome obstacles.

When further discussing how Dana has overcome obstacles she brought out a book to share. “I brought my favorite Magna/Anime book, Two Hearts and I have a quote inside I’d like to share: [“A tree planted near the waters bears fruit but only when its time is right, its leaves will
never wither and brings prosperity to all”] That quote came from another book *Daphne in the Impressive Blue* but both this book and the quote have helped me to have a voice and now to help others have a voice too”. It is through this final act of motivation, using one’s voice to overcome, that Dana hopes to help herself as well as others to overcome challenges or obstacles, and to find the strength to speak up to those who put one down and take advantage of opportunities that are provided to improve one’s self and community.

The challenges that Leah has faced have been due to her past and her ability to finance an education. Due to her past felony conviction financing an education has become a constant battle. However Leah has persevered and stated “CSTEP, Honors program and having instructor who are willing to work on weekends, extend office hours to give extra help, the Learning Center I have been able to overcome obstacles. Also have a mentor who has helped me with independent research and I’ve learned so much about working in a lab ad I will take that experience and learn more.” Overcoming obstacles has allowed Leah to grow and for others to see her as a leader and mentor. Leah learned these skills by first finding those on the Community College campus who could mentor her and provide challenges that have led to opportunities.

Leah does not talk much about her past mistakes. However, when asked to bring an object that shows or exemplifies you to be a leader she choose to bring her paperwork releasing her from probation after her felony conviction. When asked about what this paperwork meant she stated; “Temptation is there to go do something that I know I can make a quick buck to make sure I can put food in the fridge and get toilet paper, but the risks puts me in jeopardy of being back on probation and having someone else in charge of my life. Making ineligible for aid and school. I also remember how they spoke to me the first time I was checking in for probation and
I don’t want that again. They talked to me like I was a piece of shit, a criminal”. To Leah this paperwork is a reminder of where she has come from and serves as a reminder of a past she does not wish to return to as she moves forward in life. This paperwork gives her strength to seek out good leaders and mentors and to also serve as a good leader and mentor to others.

When Leah was asked about why she takes on leadership she stated, “My personality type pushes me to take ownership when things are not being taken care of. I don’t necessarily like to be the designated learn but rather lead by example or actions”. Leah also feels that she can identify with a greater mass of people and can help them to pick themselves up and reach for their goals. “Others may not be able to see the needs of a returning adult student, or a high school dropout or understand what it means to have been locked up and I can take all of these things into account”. Being able to understand the difficulties that others have had makes Leah feel that she can lead or mentor others and that due to her experiences, although many were not positive, she can also be a good leader and mentor.

Additionally Leah has very strong feelings about others getting involved. “It builds confidence and as a student you will perform better and be willing to take chances, if you are also an active part of your community you are respected, relied on and then in turn you become more reliable and willing to participate in your community”.

**Win-Win**

The students interviewed discussed how they felt they were giving up something to gain something by being involved in leadership. Many referenced it as a win-win, in the end, meaning the opportunities presented to them provided opportunities for the individual student but also for the larger group. Therefore the individual gained and so did the group, a win for both. “I feel the connections I have made here are going to help me in networking in the future. The fact
that I was so vested and had a voice and knew if I had a concern I had people who could help me because I met them through my leadership position and could reach out to them to help me”.

Gavin has made a connection between being underrepresented, wanting a voice, finding a voice and then using that voice to help others gain a voice in addressing personal and social issues. Gavin utilized what he thought was his only option, attending Community College, to gain skills that helped him see himself as a leader and how those skills will help him in the future as a professional. Through his experiences, Gavin feels he has gained the leadership skills that will serve him as a community member as well as by assisting others who feel different to understand that they have a voice to advance not only themselves but their community as well.

Gavin has the opportunity to encourage others to get involved and clearly understands that with a little more effort students can get involved which will help them make connections and learn skills that will last a lifetime. As he put it, students should “get involved in college. It’s very easy to go to class and leave campus. Here at the Community College you are only here for two years and it is hard to make those connections in a short time but it is so important to make those connections”. Through student leadership, Gavin sees that it is his responsibility to help support students in finding their voice and building relationships with others.

Rebecca looks at attending Community College as a win-win for her and her family; Rebecca gets an education and time to think about what to do with it and her family still gets her help in their daily functioning. When discussing with Rebecca what motivates her to lead and if she could bring an artifact to share, Rebecca admitted that she found it a hard task. Rebecca then looked down showed her arm full of hair ties. “I chose these hair ties as they stretch and have some give which is exactly what I think a good leader should be able to do. I believe a person can only take so much and to know his or her limits because it they don’t and take on too much,
they will break just as the hair tie would break if you put too much hair in it.” She indicated that as soon as she saw the hair ties they made her think about the flexibility that a good leader needs to have and how it is important for a good leader to know when to say yes, but also to be able to say no for the greater good of all.

It is clear that Rebecca has taken the encouragement of others to get involved and in return has used these opportunities to participate in leadership roles as another tool to create success for herself. When asked about getting other students involved Rebecca responded by stating, “Don’t just go to class, but make an investment and get involved. Make friends and a connection to the college.” Rebecca indicated that had she not been encouraged to get involved she may not be doing as well as she is in college, would not have the friends she has and her college experience would not have been as good. Rebecca feels she has learned valuable skills that will last a lifetime beyond the academics learned in the classroom.

As a father, Marcellus also feels a sense of responsibility and that urgency that others depend on him including his children. He views Community College as a win-win for him and for his children. Marcellus had photos of his children with him and stated the following: “I am so proud of my children. One just graduated from Community College. One graduated from another college and the oldest is currently working on her master’s degree. They look at me as Dad, and as an example I want to be credible to my children. If I can overcome this then you can too. Don’t give up when things do go bad. This took me a while to overcome. In return they are proud of me for moving on and returning to school and to a profession.” Marcellus considers the turns that he has taken in life as his responsibility but as he feels others are watching him and they depend on his ability to come back from defeat to claim a victory, and that victory will be achieving his goal of becoming a counselor and helping others once he obtains his degree.
Leah has accepted that she cannot change her past and seeks to improve every day to get to her goal of completing an associate’s degree. She has gained many things including, “Confidence in becoming a member of the community of the school. Faculty and staff are great mentors and are encouraging. If I had not gotten involved then I don’t think I would have gotten that mentoring feel. You develop a relationship with your mentor and it truly helps in all aspects of your academics and college life”. Leah has taken advance of the opportunities presented to her at the Community College but has expanded those opportunities to make an impact on her community as well. Leah’s research will not only help her advance her educational career but will also help the greater community where she lives. She wins an educational experience and the community wins a true community activist.

Second chances

Having previously attended a university, Gavin knew it was important to get involved, to meet people and to network on the campus of the college. He stated, “I really didn’t like that students weren’t involved. Not helping campus or community, as well as the students themselves”. Gavin got involved because he didn’t like what he saw and knew that the only way to make a change would be to get involved and to voice his concerns. If no one else was going to speak up to make positive changes then Gavin would be the one to help others speak up.

Community College for Marcellus is providing a second chance to become a professional instead of being someone who works just to pay bills. Marcellus knows his mistakes in life have led him to where he is and although many would have given up, he takes his experiences as life lessons to not be repeated. “I am responsible for all that has happened and told myself I wanted to get back into a professional field. That helped my psyche and going from teaching to counseling was close enough to satisfy my need to return to the professional world”, and this is
the plan that Marcellus created and hopes to complete after successful completion of one last semester. By using his life experiences and taking advantage of those opportunities that are still available Marcellus has not given up but rather chosen to use the bad with the good to return to the professional workforce.

For Leah Community College is her chance to prove she has changed, grown and can become a productive member of society. Leah showed her release papers from probation and admitted that she never wants to go back to feeling worthless as she did when she was on probation. Community College has provided her the opportunity to learn, to locate a mentor and to become a mentor. Community College has given her a second opportunity to fulfill her lifelong goals. “Some of the admin and faculty treat students that they are just here for a check. Because completion and transfer rates are so low, you get some academic advising and they say take whatever you want because you won’t graduate anyways. Sometimes I feel like I am not being challenged. I have a mentor he has helped me with independent research and I’ve learned so much about working in a lab and I will take that experience and learn more”

Involvement

Gavin’s comment, “Knowing how to run a meeting and how to handle conflicting situations will help in the future. Understanding hierarchy, chains of command how they work and how to follow. Being able to work with people I do not agree with and how to be objective”, is representative of how all students felt about how they will be able to use their leadership skills in the future. All of the students indicated that the experiences they have gained in and out of the classroom, specifically in their leadership roles are skills that will continue to grow and be useful in the future as professionals in their fields as well as active community members. The running
theme seemed to indicate that their Community College experience as well as leadership experiences would lead to lifelong skills.

Many noted that they had learned tolerance, patience and how to handle responsibility. Their investment and involvement in leadership also gained them access to mentors as well as college and community leaders where they knew how to utilize the networking skills they had gained to get them to their next step in either other educational or professional arenas.

In her experiences at the Community College Shanelle has learned the importance of involvement and networking. She stated that “being a part of these groups help you get to being the best you that you can be, so be a leader”, and through this involvement Shanelle has told others to seek out others on campus to open doors of opportunity.

Shanelle stated, “Getting involved in CSTEP helped me to reach out to see how I could accomplish my goals. CSTEP also provided opportunities to me that I would not have had in any other realm. I have encouraged others to get involved now too so that they can take advantage of the opportunities that are available on campus. Involvement has helped me academically, socially and in seeking out a professional path to follow”. This statement is again evidence of the importance that Shanelle places on finding someone or some group to get involved with on the college campus. Involvement with others can open the doors that one may not know even exist until they are shown the door by others.

As an older returning adult student, who also has had an extensive work history, Marcellus explained that he knew the importance of being involved and networking while in college. Marcellus uses how he feels about involvement at the college as a way to help others get involved and to further that involvement by seeing the connection it makes to channels and networks in the professional field. Marcellus stated that his own involvement, “made me stronger
in my resolve not to engage in activities that previously got me into trouble. It is helping to maintain a professional image.” Utilizing involvement in student leadership as a way to get networked professionally and to be successful as a student. Marcellus models this and encourages student involvement by others as well.

Looking back at her last few semesters at college Christina stated, “I probably would have done more, more participation and involvement. I like to give input but often take a back seat so next time I’d say I would get more involved sooner”. It is through her involvement that Christina met others who have helped her to maintain her faith and to push forward even when she has felt that the institution has placed great obstacles in her path, such as changing requirements for a degree or courses needed for a degree.

**Summary**

These interviews enabled the students to tell their stories and to discuss their experiences as underrepresented students, leaders and how these experiences will remain with them throughout their lifetime. These seven students indicated that had it not been for their involvement and for the mentors who assisted them they may not have been able to gain the education or the skills that each has gained in and out of the classroom. These experiences in leadership as a student will move them to provide leadership in whatever setting they may be in whether it be another educational setting or in the general community. All felt that it was important to continue to provide leadership as they had learned so that they could help teach others to take on leadership roles. Lastly these students all indicated that these opportunities are the reasons for their success in the Community College and their hope that more opportunities similar to the ones they were able to access will be provided to other students at the Community College in years to come.
The students believe that the opportunities presented to them in leadership have helped them develop academically and professionally. Many believe that the ability to participate in leadership has motivated them to be better students and to mentor their peers. It is a ‘pay it forward’ mentality where each of these students noted a mentor at the Community College assisted them and through that they acknowledge the importance of involvement, therefore hoping to encourage other to take advantage of opportunities to participate in leadership.

Community College students in this study found that participation in leadership did motivate them to reach their goal of completion at the Community College. Mentors within the campus community provided the support and guidance. Therefore, the more encouragement that can be given for students to participate in leadership opportunities at the Community College, it is hopeful that more will reach their goal of college completion.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how student engagement and participation in student leadership would lead to higher educational success, including increased retention and completion rates among Community College students, particularly those who are self-identified as underrepresented. Through student interviews data was gathered as to how students felt leadership activities influenced their academic results, retention in higher education and future plans. The following chapter discusses the interview results presented in Chapter 4 relative to the research questions and considers implications for current practice and future research.

Community College

Community College needs to be a welcoming environment where people may be informed and where there is consistent involvement with the faculty and staff among the students (Schuetz, 2008). According to the students interviewed for this study, the ability to be successful in reaching their goals was related to their ability to find a welcoming environment and a place where they could interact with like-minded people, such as the faculty and staff, especially those in the same field that the student was studying. Through these interactions and opportunities to network, these students found a community where they could grow and thrive, academically, professionally and socially.

Involvement in a variety of activities at the Community College, outside of academics, assisted many of the students interviewed the opportunity to gain confidence, overcome obstacles and grow. Berger and Milem (1999) stated that the involvement of underrepresented students at their college allows for their growth academically and socially and the stories that
these students told about their Community College experiences indicate they have indeed gained skills. Those students who got involved gained insight into themselves, as well as their community, and how to use these learned skills to advance academically and socially within the college community with hopes of carrying these skills into the larger community.

Gavin yearned for acceptance and found that at the Community College. The college community accepted him as a student regardless of his sexual identity, age and income. Other researchers into acceptance have had similar findings, such as Chaves (2006), whose research discussed Schlossberg’s theory (1989) and how Community Colleges need to decrease the sense that students have of not fitting in and increase the ability to allow students to express their beliefs, right or wrong, so that they can know that they matter to someone else. Gavin indicated in his interviews that through his connection with his peers, faculty and staff at the Community College he was able to continue to grow his leadership skills and through that assisted him in making a commitment to complete his educational goals. As he stated, students should, “… get involved in college. It’s very easy to go to class and leave campus. Here at the Community College you are only here for two years and it is hard to make those connections in a short time but it is so important to make those connections”.

As Community Colleges are traditionally the academic institutions that students attend for two-three years, making a connection with a staff or faculty member is important and must occur early in the students’ attendance at the Community College. Many times overcoming obstacles and struggles occur as the student sees through the eyes of his or her mentor what should be occurring and then the student leads by example. Chaves (2006) research discussed the importance of faculty/staff to student interaction and students interviewed stressed the fact that
interaction was a major component in overcoming the struggles at the Community College in order to gain a degree.

In her interviews, Leah had talked of the consistent and early support from instructors and staff at the Community College. Schuetz (2008) indicate that this type of early and consistent relationship between the adult student and someone at the college are important in attaining a true working relationship where the student can succeed. Marcellus also gave examples of the importance of mentors, both faculty and staff, when interviewed, and stressed the importance of encouraging new students to get involved and to locate an instructor, particularly one in your field of study, that you could develop and maintain a relationship with throughout your college years.

Persistence is a concern among the administration of Community Colleges and Berger and Milem (1999) noted that the student most likely to persist is a female coming from high school with a good high school GPA and who is financially stable. While Rebecca exemplified this on one hand, as she went directly to college from high school and had a strong GPA, her financial stability was founded in her acknowledgment of staying at the Community College and utilizing its financial aid was the only way she could afford a college education. While these choices formed part of the self-selection as an underrepresented student, Rebecca noted that they were made based on her ability to serve her family and avoiding accruing additional debt while attaining her educational goals.

By learning about this population, perhaps the campus can come to an understanding whereby similar values and norms can be established so all can learn to function together in support of each other. Berger and Milem (1999) also indicated in their study that students would persist if their values, norms and patterns of behavior were similar to those already in existence
at the Community College. Faculty and staff at the Community College need to become more aware of the student population, specifically those of underrepresented groups, who attend the college. The faculty seeks out students with similar interests and seeks out leaders to take groups to the next level towards professionalism. The extension of staff and faculty reaching out to students, who are similar, in values and norms, should be nurtured throughout the Community College campus.

Resources and mentors, leading to a sense of belonging and purpose, also seem to be a key in student retention and success at the Community College not only in this study but also in the study completed by Schuetz (2008). The examples discussed above, drawn from the student interviews, highlighted the challenges such as: financial, educational, family or legal that these students have overcome. By locating a mentor and getting involved in student leadership the students found ways to overcome the obstacles and to persevere. By students giving back they pay it forward and in return learning about resources that can provide guidance and assistance to students along the way. The Community College can be the place that provides a sense of belonging and allows the ability to be a part of the greater community. The college provides the environment whereby the student can develop as a leader and a person.

**Leadership and leadership theory**

When one believes that he or she has a voice it is much easier to have a sense of self-worth and the ability to excel in whatever that he or she wants to do currently and in the future. Miles (2010) found in her study that students who felt they had a voice and were heard got involved in campus activities, specifically through the governing bodies. By having a voice students felt a sense of belonging to the institution or community and therefore contributed to that community. The stories told by the interviewees highlight the possibilities of a relationship
between retention at Community College and the ability to find a place and/or someone who accepts the (underrepresented) student.

Leadership has been presented as a tool to be heard, get things done and to help others see that they too can move forward. Berger and Milem (1999) indicated that students who were involved and had learned to integrate into the systems would then be on the right path to persist through higher educational systems. Leah spoke at great lengths how she overcame her criminal past to get to a place where people at the Community College valued her knowledge and did not judge her for her past mistakes. Leah has been able to move past things that occurred in her past and to move forward by taking advantage of the opportunities that faculty and staff presented to her at the Community College including the opportunity to conduct research about her own community, which she hopes will improve the health of her community members.

Exploring, or having the courage to participate in activities that are foreign or different but turn into learning activities whereby one gains not only knowledge but also social and emotional skills important as Miles (2010) discovered in her research. In the case of Rebecca, the intentional involvement of staff with her, encouraging her to take advantage of all things and opportunities provided to her have allowed her to grow beyond the classroom and to learn life long skills in teamwork and leadership. Once she got involved Rebecca was able to see how she could work within the hierarchy to make a club successful and then to move on to higher student government position to help a greater number of students and organizations. This opportunity has allowed her to grow in confidence and encouraged her to continue to pursue educational attainment through transfer to a 4-year university or college upon degree completion at the Community College.
Involvement allows for growth as well as for exploration into the professional field beyond the walls of the educational institution. Chaves (2006) indicated that through faculty hosting in and out of classroom experiences students seek these opportunities to learn practical application of the skills learned in the classroom. The involvement helps students to learn about the differences and similarities that are in the college community as well as the greater community. Marcellus noted in his interviews the importance of getting involved as a means to network and to take advantage of opportunities outside of the college. Networking is yet another way to be involved in the educational process and a way to become grounded and invested in the process and education through leadership and involvement.

Miles (2010) studied student leadership and found that students felt very strongly about forming relationships with their peers, faculty and staff on the campus and gaining the support of the administration. Shanelle found a group that she could form a positive relationship with and through that group learned to gain support of the administrators so that she can use her skills in mentorship to help influence others. Finding a way to use ones talents to makes gains for self and community are part of the development of leadership.

“Leadership development involves engaging with learning opportunities in one’s environment over time to build one’s capacity or efficacy to engage in leadership” theory (Komives, Mainella, Longerbeam, Osteen, and Owen, 2006, p. 402). More specifically, leadership development theory indicates that students will follow a path of development going through the following phases: awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identification, leadership differentiation, generativity and finally integration/synthesis into leadership. From the student interviews it was evident that each had progressed through the phases of leadership development discussed by Komives, et al. (2006), as they moved through their time at the
Community College. All of the students interviewed self-recognized as leaders (awareness), were currently participating in leadership (exploration/engagement), identified as a leaders by their peers (identified), engaged in activities that develop leadership skills (leadership differentiation), recognized the needs of others going beyond their own personal needs (generativity), and lastly they all indicated that they knew they were undertaking a lifelong process whereby they would continue to develop and improve as leaders (integration and synthesis). This movement was not immediate for all, but rather through a process by which most indicated a mentor first encouraged their role in leadership and then assisted them in becoming the leaders that they are today. This commitment to learn, grow and be an active member of a community will provide these students with the same skills that they can find useful in the work world and in their communities making them viable community members.

**Research Questions**

Seven students, self-selected as underrepresented were interviewed on three separate occasions and their responses recorded and coded for analysis to collect data in relationship to the following questions:

- Why do self-identified, underrepresented students engage and actively participate in student leadership opportunities at the Community College?
- How do self-identified, underrepresented students who engage and actively participate in student leadership describe current experiences in leadership and academics?
- How do self-identified, underrepresented students who engage and actively participate in student leadership describe connections between their Community College experiences (academic and leadership) with their future plans?
Although the students were not asked these specific questions, the rich content revealed through the course of the interviews can be ascribed to each of these questions as the students described how they identified as an underrepresented student and how their participating in leadership has affected them academically and socially as they worked to complete their associates degree at the local Community College.

**Research Questions and Interview Themes**

There were seven themes that came forward during these interviews including: acceptance, differences, label, challenges, win-win, second chances and involvement. The themes that developed provided insight into the following questions first posed by this study: why the students choose to attend Community College, how leadership impacted their academic and finally how their roles in leadership at the Community College might impact their futures.

**RQ 1 - Why do self-identified, underrepresented students engage and actively participate in student leadership opportunities at the Community College**

While each individual may have slightly different and individual reasons for engaging and participating in student leadership opportunities, this study found that some of the reasons for participating in student leadership came under the themes of acceptance and second chances.

For some the need to be accepted was present and therefore when a group was found that accepted them the students got involved and then moved up to leadership in order to help other students to find acceptance. The students who attend Community College who were interviewed came in with a story about why they chose to attend Community College and every story was unique. Through their stories it was evident that each sought to be accepted and through leadership they were able to provide a way to give back to others seeking acceptance as well.
For some students the Community College may have been the place that provided a second chance but those who took the chance to get involved in leadership, did it in order to help others. These students wanted to give back to the community that had provided the opportunity for them to learn and to grow. The students who were interviewed saw a need to help themselves and others and therefore got involved in leadership at the Community College as a way to give back and help provide a second chance for others as had been provided to them.

Acceptance

Students that were interviewed stated the need to be accepted and to have the college community accept them as a student and as an individual was what drew them to attend the Community College. The diversity that is seen and accepted at the Community College allows for students from diverse backgrounds to attend without the pressure of trying to conform to a set of standards imposed upon them. One reason that the students interviewed in this study chose to attend Community College was due to the diversity that is accepted on the Community College campus and that ability to accept any and all persons seeking an education into their community. In Ortiz (2000) and Choy (2001) research they discussed how vastly diverse the Community College populations are and how the student population is comprised of a large amount of first generation students, ethnic minorities, or as stated throughout this study, underrepresented students. The underrepresented students attend Community Colleges at a higher rate than the 4-year universities (Association of Community Colleges, 2000) and therefore the diversity is present and continues. This observation of the diversity makes the Community College a clear choice to those who are seen as, or treated as different and seeking a place to be accepted.

Gavin and Dana were not only seeking an education but also acceptance by others. These perhaps may not have been visible to all that these individuals were seeking the acceptance, as
they were not vocal about wanting that acceptance until they saw others who also seek the same acceptance. Their ability to help others towards acceptance was what drove them to accept themselves, seek out faculty and staff on the campus to support them and then to support others who were also seeking acceptance. Gavin and Dana first sought out acceptance and that needs to start with the staff and faculty being accepting of the diversity among the students that they will serve at the Community College.

Second Chances

Community College may not have been the first choice of a student. In the interviews completed in this study there were students who had tried attending other colleges and found that the Community College was the setting that was most forgiving of past mistakes and had the tolerance needed to provide a second chance at success for these students. At least two of the students interviewed had attended other institutions before coming to the Community College. These students realized that the Community College was the option that made the most sense at this point in their lives. The Community College did not judge their past experiences but took advantage of any credits available that could assist them in receiving the degree sought at the Community College. Two of the students interviewed also felt that Community College was their second chance after having a criminal record. Both acknowledged that they could not escape their past or their record but could move forward and that the Community College was the place that provided them with that opportunity.

Community College was found on the concept of open access for all. Judgment is reserved as to why someone has chosen to attend Community College and it is apparent that students appreciate this acceptance as many find it the only place that will offer a second chance. The supports need to be in place at these institutions to allow for students who have made past
mistakes to enroll and attend without judgment. The returning student population at the Community College is evident of this as they have either never attended college or failed at their first attempt at college. Open enrollment needs to be reviewed and remembered as Community Colleges look to increase enrollment and completion. Accepting students is not the problem but the support that need to be present once they being may need reinforcing. The students interviewed acknowledged the need for support systems at the college and indicated that mentors were a large part of their success the second time around.

Attending a Community College was a choice that the students made as it met their needs, not only academically, but also socially and professionally (Reeve, 2012). The ability to accept students from diverse backgrounds as well as to allow for students who had perhaps been dealing with non-traditional challenges such as returning to school after prison or going to school while being a parent, encompasses the spirit of open enrollment that the Community College was born (Baird, 1990). Community Colleges were created as a place developed to welcome community members to engage in academic and overall workplace skills growth (Wells, 2008). From the words of the students interviewed this college is still providing that environment of acceptance and openness for all. The Community Colleges need to continue to provide the tradition of open enrollment for all to encourage all community members that education advancement is available opportunity for all community members.

Even though all of the students were similar in valuing the traditional aspects of the Community College environment, they had unique challenges. For instance, Gavin is undergoing transformation from female to male and seeking acceptance for his choices. In contrast, Leah and Marcellus have past criminal histories that they are seeking forgiveness from, as well as past experiences where they thoroughly understand the importance of making connections at the
college, as those connections will help in future areas such as career opportunities. These unique challenges drew them to engaging leadership at the Community College. Understanding the individual experiences of students allowed me as a researcher to understand that the need for second chances and acceptance drove these unique students to seek out other like-minded students, faculty, and staff.

**RQ 2 - How do self-identified, underrepresented students who engage and actively participate in student leadership describe current experiences in leadership and academics?**

Three themes emerged when students who were interviewed discussed their involvement in student leadership and academics at the Community College. Those themes were challenges, win-win and labels. By getting involved in activities outside of the classroom, both experiential learning opportunities and leadership opportunities, these students interviewed indicated that the relationships that they formed helped them academically, but also encouraged them to strive to be successful in their academics. The obstacles that each student had to overcome led them to build confidence and strength to push forward and move to complete their academic goals. The students interviewed indicated that they were aware of their own challenges; including learning disabilities, deficiencies, past errors, however, they had learned to overcome those and then sought out challenges, in academics and civic duties that provided them a chance to feel like they were in win-win situations at the Community College. These students could triumph over their deficiencies and triumph as contributing members of their community. They were able to escape the labels placed upon them by society, family and individuals. These students were able to do for themselves and become more aware of their own needs, which motivated them and others to succeed.
**Challenges**

Goldrick-Rab (2010) stated that the majority of students attending Community Colleges faced the following challenges: social inequality, academic challenges, economic challenges, informational hurdles and lack of commitment. Students attending Community College therefore already have a host of challenges placed in front of them as they seek to overcome and surpass the expectations that others have of them. Students worry daily about finances, grades, fitting in/acceptance and how they will accomplish the goals each have set. The everyday hurdles that each person have are their challenges and then more are added such as social and financial inequality.

Throughout the interviews the students stressed that they all had challenges, however they also stressed that having a mentor at the Community College helped to overcome many of the challenges. Leah and Marcellus had criminal records that were in the back of their thoughts and which affected their ability to pay for tuition. Each feared how it would impact their futures however having found a mentor, in their field of study, allowed each of them to concentrate on their academics knowing they had a connection to the professional world via their mentors. By getting involved, as Dana mentioned, one can meet people so you can learn to be you own advocate. It is the skills that each of the students earned, with guidance from a mentor, that they were able to overcome the daily and societal challenges placed upon them while attending Community Colleges. Through this, the importance of establishing mentors at the Community College can bee seen as a means towards improving retention and completion rates.

Overcoming challenges to getting an education and to complete that education, can be decreased with the incorporation of mentors at the Community College. The mentor can provide academic and financial guidance enabling the student to gain education in the classroom while
also gaining the information required overcoming the challenges outside of the classroom. These lessons learned through leadership opportunities, which are many times provided by the mentor, assist the student in achieving their goals.

**Labels**

The population of students attending Community Colleges traditionally consist of a diverse group including more older students, women, members of diverse ethnic or racial groups, employed either full or part time and likely be first generation college attending students (Bragg, 2001). The students in this study are specifically self-identified as underrepresented. The labels, underrepresented, means that they are members of an ethnic minority and/or are receiving full financial aid based on socio economic status. The students therefore have been given the labels of traditional Community College students due to their ethnicity and economic status. Opportunities in leadership can help overcome these labels that have been placed upon them as they prove to those who have provided the labels that these students can be successful.

Christina admitted that being labeled as underrepresented placed more pressure upon her to prove to others she could overcome and succeed. Although this label allowed her access to other services and financial aid, she still felt that it placed others’ eyes upon her just waiting for her to make a mistake. Shanelle also know others had placed labels on her and defied those labels stating she “did not consider herself underrepresented even if others did”. This unique opportunity to see how society or the college institution places labels on these students shows the impact that the labels have both positively and negatively to their success. These labels may allow students access to services and financial aid but through their eyes it places undo pressure upon them to succeed against all odds. These students want to escape the labels and move beyond the place that society has put them based upon their ethnicity or economic status. They
want a chance to be productive members of the greater community. The students that were interviewed were seeking to remove the labels that society had placed upon them. By dispelling the myths that they are failures, that they are stupid or that they are just not good enough to succeed motivates them to do well and learn more at the Community College. This motivates them to succeed.

**Win-Win**

Attending Community College for most of the students interviewed was the option they choose as with one to help the family, help them gain skills or because it was a good financial option. Therefore many referred to Community College as their win-win as it would help them to advance academically or professionally but that it also helped their family, friends or some other entity. Gavin won his identity but helped others know it was okay to be different and to speak up. Rebecca won by attending college close to home and being financially smart about how to fund her education. Marcellus won by getting back into a professional field and maintaining the respect of his children throughout his journey. All knew this would be a gamble but all were willing to take it, as this was the best chance for them to win.

Community Colleges need to recognize that students attend their institutions for a variety of reasons. Also understanding that each student has goals and in order to reach their goals will take the necessary steps. If the college institution were to work more closely with the students then perhaps the next win-win would be more retention and completion of the Community College student. The student wins the education that he or she sought and the institution can have positive data on its success rate in terms of completion of degrees.

Participating in leadership is a positive experience because students learn how to be leader and learn to apply those leadership skills in various aspects of their life on campus (Baird,
The students in this study indicated that leadership helped them in the classroom because they had to learn to be tolerant of others differing opinions and views, how to work together as a, how to be a leader in the classroom and lastly how to apply information and skills presented in the classroom to life. By participating in leadership the students interviewed were able to network with others peer, faculty/staff and administration of the college. The leadership opportunities that students experienced gave them a space to use the academic content they were learning in their classes. Essentially, the students described leadership as being a space where they could engage in experiential or out of classroom learning (Baird, 1990). They were able to put into practice the theories they learned in their various classes (Downey, Frost, Holland, Schultz and Strom, 2010).

RQ 3 - How do self-identified, underrepresented students who engage and actively participate in student leadership describe connections between their Community College experiences (academic and leadership) with their future plans?

The students who were interviewed could not express how much they appreciated the opportunities that had been provided outside of the classroom, the experiential learning opportunities, and specifically the leadership opportunities. The students realized that these opportunities to participate in leadership allowed them to gain skills that will go with them throughout their academic and professional careers. The opportunity to participate in experiential learning, through their leadership roles, provided these students with an opportunity to take what had been studies in the classroom to other areas of their lives. This type of learning is what will assist these students in being successful members of the community. The themes of differences and involvement were discovered when discussing with the students who were interviewed about their Community College experiences in leadership and academic and how those experiences
might connect to their future plans. These themes related to how the students saw their own growth, which included what they had learned in and out of the classroom while attending Community College.

**Differences**

Through the interviews students expressed how they had learned that although they were seen as different that they could overcome and could help others to overcome as well. The students interviewed stated they were underrepresented yet each felt that they had a voice that they could use to help not only themselves but also others. By gaining confidence as leaders on campus they each used their voices as the voice of the student body, in one manner or another, modeling how others could overcome the differences and reach their goals.

The students who were interviewed were aware that others saw them as different although they may not have known that their differences had placed them into a group together as underrepresented students. Christina, Gavin, Dana and Leah are all aware that they are seen as different due to their appearance. The students sought to get past the initial judgment others placed due to appearance to gain a voice and to be able to assist others who look different in becoming leaders and good students. Each of these students had to gain confidence and overcome how others viewed them to take on the challenges of academia and leadership.

Dugan, Komives and Segar (2008) discussed how stereotypes have to be overcome in order for the underrepresented students to over past how they are seen and to instead be respected for what they could do. The students, Christina, Gavin, Dana and Leah, all wanted a good education and felt they could obtain it while attending Community College. Each knew that they were seen as different and had to overcome how they were viewed so that the entre campus would view them as individuals with great potential. It was through their engagement in
leadership that each has been able to get the Community College to look past their differences and see their potential. Through this experience a valuable lesson can be learned that one cannot judge another but rather learn to explore the potential that each has to make a positive impact on the community.

**Involvement**

“Students from all backgrounds can benefit from campus involvement in leadership activities” (Miles, 2010, p. 84). Much research has been completed previously indicating the importance of student involvement in activities on campus as a means to increase their productivity in their rolls as students in the classroom. Roberts and McNeese (2008) found the students who got involved in both the classroom and their community were those that more likely to succeed and meet the goals established. Therefore, the involvement from past studies indicates this to be true, and the students in this study who were interviewed reinforced these prior findings.

Shanelle summed it up by discussing how her involvement allowed her to learn the importance of networking. She used the skills learned to take advantage of other opportunities that became available on campus once she got involved. Marcellus urged others to get involved as it is so important in the future to make the connection now and Gavin agreed with this as well in his interview. Christina summed it up when she stated had she known how important it would have been to get involved she would have done it sooner. This is a sentiment found in many, even those who completed their education, as they look back at opportunities they let slip away. Community Colleges need to provide opportunities for student involvement and engagement and put these programs into the hands of those faculty and staff that can nurture and encourage that involvement.
The students in this study participated in leadership for various reasons, but they all had a specific purpose in mind for getting involved. For Marcellus involvement means he gets a professional development edge that others who choose not to participate do not, as he is exposed to others already working in his chosen career field. Dana’s involvement has allowed her to make a connection between herself and the faculty and staff at the college. This connection allows Dana the confidence to seek out staff and faculty when she has academic issues and motivates her to do better academically. In Shanelle’s interview she indicated that getting involved has exposed her to opportunities that she would not have had otherwise such as career and college exploration beyond the Community College. The opportunity provided to her through her networking and involvement has also lead her to giving back by continuing to volunteer on the college campus. In all of these instances, students were motivated to be involved in leadership.

The students in this study were all a part of some underrepresented group on campus. Being a member of an underrepresented group also motivated them to be a leader on campus. For instance Christina and Gavin got involved with groups to help them learn to speak up against things they felt were wrong or oppressing them as a group. These students were aware that others see them as different and label them as members of an underrepresented group and by getting involved felt that they could help others who felt put down and labeled to rise up and speak out. Rebecca and Shanelle were aware of being labelled as underrepresented but did not feel that the label was appropriate. These young ladies took that label and pushed it aside in order to take advantage of opportunities to be successful and presented to them at the Community College. All of the student interviewed self-identified as underrepresented however, looked past that label to help themselves and others succeed at the Community College.
Implications

Community Colleges are striving to implement programming that will retain students as well as assist those students in completing their goals. The students interviewed indicated that there is a need for staff/faculty on the college campuses to take the time to listen to their stories. By listening to the stories of where the students have come from and how they got to the Community College, faculty and staff can then assist these students in their academic and career development. These students want someone to make them feel welcome, guide them to the knowledge needed to be successful in their chosen field and to treat them as a vital member of the community, regardless of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, criminal background or socio-economic status. These students want someone to remove the labels, give them a chance to be successful and listen to their voices.

Students who attend Community Colleges are aware of their challenges. These students knew they were labeled as underrepresented due to ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status and that they were seen as deficient in skills and knowledge. Therefore, if the students are aware of their deficiencies and labels perhaps the Community College should turn this around and help students see their strengths. At this time it may be viewed that Community Colleges should view students as promise students instead of at-risk students and utilize a strengths-based approach to assisting students (Lask, 2010). This is a different way of thinking that may need to be incorporated so students feel valued and accepted by all members of the Community College, and then this can carry on to the greater community as well.

The development of a leadership program by faculty and staff mentors providing the training for the college staff could be instrumental in developing a mentor program for student leaders. A program such as a leadership development program hosted by faculty and staff
provides a development program for all members of the Community College campus. Faculty and staff who had not been previously involved in a mentor or leadership program could develop skills that they could then pass on to students who are seeking to develop the same skills. This could be a programmatic development that helps the greater community inside and outside the college. This allows for leadership growth for all who elect to participate.

Community Colleges need to remember their roots in open access. The students interviewed talked of their struggles to overcome labels, differences, and past mistakes. In order to do this the college has to be a warm inviting environment that would seek to enroll and retain a student without prejudice. Colleges need for retention and completion should not cloud their view on the population that seeks them as a place of open access and learning for all. Hurdles need to be diminished and more resources made available to help the students gain access and maintain success in their pursuit of educational accolades.

Lastly, all colleges need to focus on how to engage students early and throughout their time at the educational institutions. Connections need to be made between staff and faculty to the students so that the student see that they are valued and that their voices do count on the campus. This early engagement could then result in the colleges’ ability to retain and have students complete educational degrees and certificates at higher rates than are currently reported. This will become increasingly more important if funding becomes dependent upon those numbers of students who successfully complete degree programs.

Action Steps

Community Colleges need to listen to the stories of their students. Students can tell you what they need and want in their education to make them successful. Programming needs to be developed based on the stories that students tell and their requests for things that they feel can
assist them in achieving their dreams. At the Community College where I work I will be implementing student leadership groups to gather information from students so that their stories can be told and from those stories positive changes can be made to assist students in being successful.

Many Community Colleges have begun to develop leadership programs on their campuses. We have developed a leadership workshop series and it is currently in the infancy stages at the Community College where these students are attending classes currently. Students who are interested in growing leadership skills are invited to participate in workshops. In order to first engage potential students, an outside speaker is brought on campus to encourage leadership growth followed by staff and current leaders to develop skills in smaller workshops.

The hardest part is to also incorporate succession planning in the program so that as leaders complete their degrees there are others who can step into leadership roles and continue the work that has been done enabling a greater number of students to be involved in leadership opportunities on the campus as well as in the larger community. This is a struggle that many Community Colleges have as students come and go within eighteen months to three years depending upon the educational certification or degree that the student may be pursuing.

Another area that needs development is in mentoring. A college wide call for mentors from all fields needs to occur and agreements made to engage students with mentors who have similar interests. Introducing students to mentors who can communicate with them as well as provide them with professional development skills are the mentors that the students are seeking. Students voiced that they want to interact with others who can help them gain professional networking skills and provide students with opportunities to grow outside of the classroom. This call for mentors has occurred in our residence halls and within our CSTEP program at the
Community College. The next step will be to make it a campus wide project where more students can actively participate in mentoring programs.

Finally, the Community College needs to remove the hurdles to success that have long been in place for underrepresented students. The biggest hurdles to remove are the labels that are placed upon students before they step into the classroom. These students are aware of the labels that they wear as may have worn them throughout their educational careers. If the labels were removed and Community Colleges developed a new mindset of seeking strengths, instead of focusing on weaknesses, perhaps more students would finish their education. Additionally, by removing the hurdles that prohibit students from developing outside the classroom as well as feeling that they are unaccepted, would be in the best interest of the college.

At our Community College we have begun to utilize Strength Quest, which is a program developed by Gallop to look at the top twenty-five strengths that individuals have and focus on the individuals strengths versus an individuals weaknesses’. The first step has been to roll this out to student leaders and next will be to have student leaders encourage their peers to participate in learning about their strengths. The hope is to have more focus throughout the campus on individual’s strengths and less focus on individual’s weaknesses.

**Future Research**

Faculty and staff need to make an effort to research the populations that attend Community Colleges, and the programs offered, to see if they meet the needs of that population. The majority of students who attend Community Colleges are members of underrepresented population. Faculty, staff and administration need to understand the population that seek to attend the Community College to then provide programming outside of the classroom that will engage them and keep them grounded in the college. Through obtaining a better insight into the
population that attends the Community College a more welcoming and inviting environment can be created where students will come, as they know they will be accepted.

Further research also needs to be done on mentor and leadership programs at the Community Colleges. Through my own professional development I have been made aware that in New York State there are over thirty Community Colleges, yet few if any have established leadership programs on their campuses. There needs to be more investment in developing leadership skills first at this level and then encouraging students to continue when they transfer to 4-year universities or transition to the work world. Mentor programs also could assist in student retention and completion, as the student attending Community College tends to have a lack of support for their academic goals. A mentoring program at the Community College could help the student make connection with the college community and initiate involvement on the campus.

Future research on this topic should be completed with the inclusion of the perspectives of faculty, staff and administration at the Community College. Interviewing faculty at the campus could assist in the research on what types of topics and activities could be further developed outside of the classroom to encourage the leadership development of students as well as assist in the research on how the impact of faculty and staff involvement with the students could lead to higher retention and completion rates at the Community College. This research would also allow for the voices of all those involved at the Community College to be heard, acknowledged and plans of action created for the greater good of all.

**Conclusion**

Does student engagement in leadership increase education success, retention and completion rates for self-identified, underrepresented students? Leadership development of
underrepresented students can assist in their retention and completion of academics by providing them the opportunity to have a voice on the campus and within their communities. In order to meet the needs of those who attend Community Colleges these institutions need to listen to the stories of their students and make an effort to understand their needs by building on their strengths.

Listen to the voices of the students. Listen to what they are seeking to gain from an education and what their future goals include. To increase the retention and completion rates there needs to be a partnership and an understanding between the students and the faculty/staff/administration of the Community College.
REFERENCES


Herron, T. J. (2012). *Promoting College Completion Through Leadership Among Underrepresented Urban College Students: A Theory of Change and Evaluation of*
College Retention Outcomes for the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative
(Doctoral dissertation).


APPENDIX A

Description of study to present to potential participants

At this time I am seeking participants for a research study that I am conducting to complete my degree requirements towards my Ed.D. I am seeking students who may be interested in participating in a study where they will be interviewed three times about their reasons for attending Community College, their leadership skills and activities and lastly about their future goals and aspirations.

Therefore, if you are a student leader, involved in Student Congress or a student run club or organization, and are self-identifying as a member of an underrepresented group, due to your race, ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status and are interested in participating I would ask that you send me an email at overrocker.k@husky.neu.edu

Thank you
Dear Students:

At this time I am seeking 4-6 students to participate in my research study. This study will reveal the experiences of students at Mohawk Valley Community College who identify themselves as a member of an underrepresented population (based on race, ethnicity, gender or socio-economic status) and their experiences as student leaders. I am hoping to explore what lead these students to take on leadership roles and the impact that those roles may have had on their academics, social interactions and if they perceive any impact on their professional futures.

Your active participation in this study would take approximately 3-4 hours of time. You will be asked to participate in three interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. Should you consent to participating in this study you will assist in the selection of a location and time to meet, providing that the location is a quiet, private space either on or off campus. The purpose of the interviews will be to learn about your academic choices and experienced, your decisions to participate in leadership and the impact that these choices have had on your educational goals. We will agree upon times and places to meet and confirm via email.

Interview one will last approximately one hour. During this interview you will be asked about you, and your decision for attending Mohawk Valley Community College. Upon completion of this interview we will determine a date, time and location for the second interview. You will also be asked to bring an artifact, of your choosing, that you feel represents you and your leadership qualities. This artifact will be discussed at your second interview.
The second interview will focus on your leadership experiences and how those have impacted you academically and professionally. We will discuss the artifact you bring and how it represents you and your leadership attributes. Upon completion of this interview we will determine a date, time and location for the third and final interview.

The third and final interview will focus on the impact that student leadership has had on you as a person, and how you think it might impact your future. Throughout the interviews you will be asked to share as much as you would like about these areas outside of the framed questions.

These interviews will all be recorded and then transcribed. The transcribed interviews will then be read to you to verify authenticity of the stories you tell so that they are told in your words. It is the hope that you will be read the documentation of the previous interview before starting the next interview.

If you would like to participate in this study, I am asking you to commit to participating in all three interviews, and the sharing of the artifact, although you are of course free to choose not to participate at any time throughout the process.

If you are interested in participating in this study I would ask that you contact me by email by (DATE TO BE DETERMINED ONCE IRB APPROVAL RECEIVED). If more than 6 individuals express interest I will need to select from that group and I will let all who submit interest know if they have or have not been chosen in a timely manner.

If you are asked to participate in this study you will also be asked to read, sign and return a consent to participate form. If you do not understand anything state on the consent form I ask that you contact me before signing it so that we can review any items of question you may have pertaining to the consent form.
Participating in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. You can choose to not respond or ask to skip questions during the interviews if you feel uncomfortable or unable to answer. Your involvement in student leadership at Mohawk Valley Community College will not be impacted by your decision to, or not to, participate in this study.

I believe this study will benefit the college as well as students in understanding how student leadership and the experiences associated with it might impact students’ educational goals. Therefore I hope you will be willing to share your experiences, thoughts and feelings throughout the process.

So if you are interested, please contact me so that we can begin this journey.

Kim Overrocker
Director, Student Engagement and Outreach
Mohawk Valley Community College
1101 Sherman Drive, ACC 208
Utica, NY 13501
Phone: (315) 792-5424
Fax: (315) 792-5422
overrocker.k@husky.neu.edu
APPENDIX C
Consent to Participate in Research Study

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator: Kim Overrocker

Title of Project: Community Colleges: Exploring student engagement and leadership opportunities as a route to higher retention and completion rates

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study:
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are a current student leader at Mohawk Valley Community College as well as a member of an underrepresented group.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to determine if students of underrepresented groups who participate in student leadership at the Community College retain or complete their goals at the college.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to agree to participate in three separate interviews. The times and locations of the interviews will be agreed upon by the participant and the interviewer, however there will be three separate interviews that will need to be conducted in a quiet, private location. During the interviews you will be asked open-ended questions and you provide, as much information as you feel is appropriate.
Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed at a time and quiet, private location that is convenient for you. There will be three interviews, with each interview taking about one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no risk, however if at any time the participant is uncomfortable he/she may stop the interview.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help future students attending Community College.

Who will see the information about me?
Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known to anyone excluding the researcher, who will be the interviewer as well. Pseudo names will be given to all participants. The interviews will be recorded using smartphone technology (recording device) and the interviewer will also transpose the interviews. When the interviews are transposed then pseudo names will be given to each participant.
Confidentiality will be maintained throughout unless there is information provided that could prove harmful to the participants or other known member, which would create a legal reason to report such information.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kim Overocker, 315-792-5424 or at overocker.k@husy.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research.
Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
No, there will be no payments made to any participants in this research study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
No there will be no costs associated with participation in this research study.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________  ______________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part               Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________  ______________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent               Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
APPENDIX D

Interview One Questions

In this interview we will discuss you and your life’s path.

1. Why do you consider yourself a member of an underrepresented group?
2. Why did you choose to attend Community College?
3. What other alternatives did you consider aside from attending Community College?
4. Tell me about your academic experiences here at Mohawk Valley Community College.
5. What do you hope to accomplish here at Mohawk Valley Community College?
6. What do you plan to do after you finish here at Mohawk Valley Community College?
7. What types of support contribute to your success at Mohawk Valley Community College?
8. What types of challenges do you have here at Mohawk Valley Community College?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share?

For the next interview please bring at least one artifact that you believe represents you as a leader. These can be from your past or present and you will have an opportunity to discuss why and how this item represents you as a leader.
APPENDIX E

Interview Two Questions

IN this interview we will discuss your involvement in leadership and how those experiences have impacted you. The artifact that you brought will also be discussed and how you feel sit represents you as a person and a leader.

1. What types of leadership were you involved in prior to attending Mohawk Valley Community College?

2. Describe your leadership involvement currently at Mohawk Valley Community College.

3. What influenced you to get involved in student leadership?

4. Please describe the artifact you have brought with you to this interview that you feel influenced you to become a leader.
   a. Why did you choose this particular object?
   b. What does it mean to you?
   c. How do you think it influenced you to participate in leadership?

5. Would you recommend leadership positions on campus to new incoming students who may be from the same or similar underrepresented group? Why?

6. How, if at all, does being a member of an underrepresented group impacted your ability to lead?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share?
APPENDIX F

Interview Three Questions

In this interview we will discuss how your leadership role has impacted you now and if you believe it will impact you in the future.

1. Knowing what you know now, would you have gotten involved in student leadership if you had to do this all over again?

2. How do your experiences here at Mohawk Valley Community College, as a student leader, influence you?
   a. your academics?
   b. your social skills?
   c. your professional goals or desires?

3. What advice would you give to those who may be interested in pursuing student leadership?

4. What advice would you give to students to help them be successful in the Community College setting?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share?